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Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles

The Immaculate Equation

"SHH..."
"HUH...? RI—!"
Rio silenced her with a finger to her lips.

Seirei Gensouki:
Spirit Chronicles

"THANK YOU, SUZUNE, KOMOMO, AKI."
Sora said in a quiet voice as she looked between the girls and the bag of sweets several times.

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Prologue: The Rules of God That Rio Knows

1. Every time a transcendent one exercises their power, their existence is wiped from the memory of the world's residents. If necessary, their memories will be adjusted to erase inconsistencies so that they make logical sense. The only people who can retain memories of the transcendent ones are fellow transcendent ones and their disciples. When anyone else tries to recall the transcendent ones, they first become incapable of thinking straight, then feel a heavy burden upon their brain.

2. Those who become transcendent will have difficulty remaining in the memory of others. They can make direct contact with the residents of the world and hold a conversation, but any memory of the transcendent one will fade the moment they part ways.

3. Transcendent ones are forbidden from supporting the interests of specific individuals or groups. Breaking this rule will result in the transcendent one forgetting the individual or group that was being supported.

4. The aforementioned rules of god apply to the disciples of the transcendent one as well. However, the effects of rule 2 can be weakened only when the disciple is separated from their transcendent master.

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Chapter 1: The Aerial Battle of Rodania

In the noble district of Rodania, home to the headquarters of the Restoration...

Along a section of a street leading to the enchanted airship harbor by the lake, Rio stared at Celia in shock.

Why?

Celia was weeping sadly—but at the same time, there was a hint of confusion on her face. A spell formula appeared around her small body as though a magic was trying to activate itself.

It worked. It's not possible to give you all of it right now, but I'm entrusting everything I couldn't give that person to you.

"H-Huh...?"

Celia looked around restlessly, unsure of where the voice was coming from. One beat later, information started flowing into her head.

"..."

Her eyes were fixed on Rio, but she wasn't seeing him. Wrapped in the dazzling glow of the spell formula, she stood there gazing into the distance.

"Celia? Celia?!"

Her father, Roland, shook her by the shoulders in a panic. Sara, Orphia, and Alma were also watching her worriedly from nearby. Everyone was equally surprised by the sudden turn of events.

But now wasn't the time to be distracted by their surprise. The Beltrum Kingdom's main army led by Duke Arbor was still attacking Rodania at this very moment—and the fall of the city was imminent.

The Aerial Knights of the Beltrum army were closing in from the skies, and the fleet of enchanted airships with Duke Arbor on board was a short distance away. The few remaining troops of the Restoration's Aerial Knights were doing their best to buy time, but they wouldn't be able to hold on for much longer.

No matter how one looked at it, the situation was clear. That was why Christina and the others trying to evacuate noticed Celia and the spell activating around her, but had to ignore her in favor of moving to the harbor.

Celia remained in her dazed state for less than a minute. Once the spell

formula faded, she snapped back to her senses.

“Ah... Oh...”

However, her expression was one of extreme sadness. Tears spilled from her eyes and flowed down her cheeks.

“Whatever is the matter, my dear Celia?” Roland asked, peering into her face. He must have sensed what his daughter was feeling from her expression.

“N-Nothing, it’s just...” Celia shook her head as she wiped her eyes. There was something more important than explaining things to Roland right now.

“...”

With her red, swollen eyes, Celia stared at Rio with a determined look, as though to say she wouldn’t be forgetting him anymore. Rio himself was staring at Celia with an absorbed gaze. The two held their gazes from a distance of two meters for a long moment. As he looked between the two of them questioningly, Roland seemed to feel an odd sense of unity between Rio and Celia.

“Who...are you?” Sara, the silver werewolf, asked. Beside her, the high elf Orphia and dwarf Alma also had their eyes fixed on Rio.

“I’m Rio,” he replied truthfully. Based on what Sora had told him, transcendent ones had difficulty remaining in the memories of those around them. The moment he distanced himself from them, they would forget they ever made contact with him. Thus, he believed there was no problem in telling them his name.

But risks aside, there was also something Rio wanted to confirm: Did Sara and the others still remember him?

“Have we...”

“...met somewhere before?”

Alma and Orphia asked together. Sure enough, they couldn’t remember Rio. But their reaction implied that they felt some sense of familiarity with him.

It seems they don’t remember me. But they seem to feel some kind of recognition.

Once Rio confirmed that, he looked up at the sky. “You must be imagining things. What’s more important right now is for you to hurry. I will escort you to the harbor.”

He had originally planned to leave at this point, but he wanted to speak to Celia some more. That was why he made such a suggestion instead.

“Let’s all go together,” Celia responded first, agreeing with Rio’s idea. “Princess Christina and the others have left already.”

“Right...”

In reality, this was no time to be chatting. Once Rio and Celia started down the street to the harbor, Roland and Sara's group finally moved as well. Just then, three young Aerial Knights descended to where Celia and the other evacuees were. Rio immediately prepared an art for counterattack, when—

Isn't that...Stewart Huguenot?

He paused his art the moment he recognized his opponent. As his last time implied, he was the son of Duke Huguenot. Back when Rio had attended the Royal Academy of Beltrum, Stewart was part of the grade one year younger than him, and he had pinned his crime of pushing Flora off a cliff onto Rio. He was the culprit behind Rio's decision to leave the Royal Academy. He had also abused Latifa for his own amusement, back when she was a slave.

The last time Rio had encountered him was when he returned to the Strahl region as Haruto. The drunk Stewart had picked a fight with Rio in an Amande restaurant, which his father Duke Huguenot scolded him harshly for. Rio hadn't seen him since that event.

Is he part of Rodania's Aerial Knights? But why has he left his squad to descend here?

The few remaining Aerial Knights of the Restoration were still fighting in the sky. With all the squads focused on stopping the enemy, why had Stewart and the other two knights left their post to descend here? Rio found their actions somewhat odd.

"Who the hell are you?!" Stewart must have found Rio and his mask equally odd, as he yelled for Rio to identify himself with a glare.

"It's okay, Stewart." Celia intervened immediately in support of Rio. "He's someone we can trust. What's more important right now is protecting Princess Christina and Princess Flora. They're up ahead—go guard them."

Having been one of her students at the Royal Academy, Stewart trusted Celia.

"Professor Celia... Very well. We will focus on protecting the princesses." Stewart backed down obediently.

"Over there! There may be someone of importance with them. Don't let them get away!"

Just then, the movements of Stewart and the other knights caught the eyes of the enemy. Aerial Knights from Beltrum started descending one after another.

"Tch..."

Sara and the spirit folk girls were the first to raise their weapons, but—

"I will bring up the rear. Sara—please guard everyone until they reach the

ship," Rio ordered, before leaving without waiting for a response.

"Huh...?"

Sara did a double take at her name being called. She hadn't introduced herself to him, but she assumed it was because he had heard the others call her name in the middle of the earlier battle.

"Sora will accompany you!" Sora immediately followed after Rio.

"Thank you. I'll do most of the fighting, so please take care of anyone who gets past me. Don't let them reach the harbor."

"Got it!"

Thus, Rio decided to throw himself into more battles.

"H-Hey...!"

With the worried look of a lost child, Celia called after Rio. She seemed to believe he would disappear again.

Rio paused and looked back at her with a gentle smile. "It's okay. We'll talk properly later."

That was enough to ease her woes. "Okay!" Celia said, wiping away her tears.

At that, Rio started running. He accelerated and took to the sky, meeting the incoming Aerial Knights midair. He then activated a spirit art to create a blast of wind that changed directions erratically, directing it at them.

"Wh-What?!"

The blast of wind swallowed up the Aerial Knights along its path.

"Huh?!"

The Aerial Knights were violently shaken by the wild air current. In the blink of an eye, the knights lost control of their griffins. Their safety harnesses prevented them from falling from the griffins, but the harsh wind forced them to land one after another. But there were more knights hovering just outside the range of the art.

"What is that guy?" Their attention was completely focused on Rio's presence in the air.

"Eliminate him. Prepare your photon bullets! And fire!"

"*Photon Projectilis*!"

The Aerial Knights uttered their spells one after another, deploying magic circles at the ends of their swords. Once they locked their aim onto Rio, they fired their spells at once.

"..."

Rio stared at the approaching barrage of light bullets calmly. It would have

been easy for him to accelerate and evade them, but he chose to remain in the air and draw the enemy's attacks towards himself instead. Then, he cast a barrier of magic essence to block those shots of light.

The bullets of light sank into the barrier like balls being thrown against water, losing their kinetic energy and coming to a stop. After all the attacks were successfully halted...

"Wha...?!"

The Aerial Knights who attacked were speechless—Rio had stolen control of all of their spells. Once he noted all their locations by eye, he reflected the light bullets he had caught back at them.

"E-Evade! Evade them!"

The attack they had used was rebounding back towards them. The Aerial Knights had never experienced such a thing before, so they panicked. Their formation promptly fell apart as they dashed about evading the bullets.

Photon bullets were preferred for enemy suppression as they had lower lethality than other attack magics, but a direct hit was still strong enough to send an unguarded human flying. If a bullet struck the wrong spot, it could even fracture bones or snap the spine, resulting in death.

I have to avoid hitting them if I can...

And so, Rio manually controlled every bullet one by one, diverting them away from directly hitting the knights. Choosing to injure instead of kill on the battlefield further lowered the enemy forces by causing them to redirect troops to assisting injured allies.

But another reason for his actions was the rule of god that said he couldn't support the interests of an individual or group. With the exception of a few circumstances, transcendent ones had to use their powers for the sake of the entire world. He was forbidden from participating in the conflict of humans and protecting only one side.

A certain amount of support could be overlooked, but the moment the rule was triggered he would lose all memory of the people he tried to assist. That was why the more Rio fought right now, the more the situation leaned towards activating the rule's penalty.

Crk. Crrrk.

The cracking sound of the mask, which was taking the burden of the penalty, reached Rio's ears. He had to be extremely careful of the penalty growing in proportion to the degree of his assistance—if he was going to intervene, he had to do it in a way that wouldn't be considered as strongly. This way, the penalty

would also be weakened.

There were many factors that contributed to whether his assistance would be considered strong or weak. The reason why he was only injuring the approaching enemies was because he was hoping that leaving them alive would be considered less assistance than killing them. His aim was for a stalemate in the situation without tipping the power balance. However...

“Damn it!”

“Assist the injured!”

There were too many enemies for that to be feasible. No matter how much he held back, taking on this number of people had to be considered a strong show of support.

He had no choice but to buy as much time as possible. Rio looked around the battlefield calmly, considering the most efficient way of consuming his mask’s capacity.

He controlled the countless photon bullets and made them attack the flying Aerial Knights of Beltrum Kingdom from every direction. He made them cut off the paths of those who tried to approach him and chase away those trying to flee, forcing their front lines to retreat farther and farther.

If a group of knights was gathered in one spot, he would aim to injure the griffins of one or two of those knights, forcing the others to focus on rescuing them.

The Beltrum Kingdom’s army, which had had the superior position thanks to the huge attack Renji made with his hero powers, was now faltering. The tides of battle were turning thanks to Rio’s extraordinary power.

“What is that...?”

It was clear to everyone in the surroundings that the scales were being tipped by Rio. Regardless of which side they were fighting for, the knights in the sky had their eyes fixed on him.

“It’s him! That man is the one controlling the attacks!”

“Spread out! Encircle him and defeat him!”

With their advantage in numbers, the Beltrum Kingdom’s army attempted to eliminate Rio. At their commander’s order, half the squads that hadn’t been engaged with Rio’s fight flew towards him.

“Y-Yes, now’s our chance! Use this opportunity to restore our front lines!”

Meanwhile, the Aerial Knights of the Restoration attempted to reorganize their forces. The shift of the enemy’s attention to Rio had given them the leeway to do that. Several hundred Aerial Knights from both sides filled the sky above

Rodania. But then...

What's this...?

A strange feeling filled Rio. It wasn't a bad feeling—if anything, it was good.

Rio was currently controlling several dozens of light bullets. Controlling such a number from such a far distance—and at an individual level—*should* have required extremely precise control.

Has my control over spirit arts improved?

Was it because he had awakened to his transcendent powers? Rio felt like he still had the capacity to use other arts while controlling these bullets.

In that case...

In order to deal with the incoming enemies, Rio increased the number of light orbs before him by over three digits.

"Restoration troops, head to the harbor! Create a defense line and protect the evacuees boarding the airships! Princess Christina and Princess Flora are with them," Rio said, instructing the Aerial Knights of the Restoration while moving forward to draw the attention of the Beltrum army. Furthermore, he had used a spirit art that carried his voice through magic essence, allowing him to send his voice directly to the ears of the knights who were specifically wearing the officer uniform of the Restoration.

"Huh...?"

The officers of the squads flinched at the sound of Rio's voice right by their ears. There was a fair distance between Rio and them, and they normally never heard voices this clearly while flying, so they couldn't tell who just spoke. However, the situation didn't leave them with any other choice—they turned their griffins to face the harbor and looked for the evacuees Rio had mentioned.

"There they are! We will protect Their Highnesses! Any remaining squads form a line protecting the harbor! Now!"

A man in a fancier uniform than the others gave a decisive order. He must have been the highest-ranking officer present. The other officers began instructing their squads too. Thus, the remaining squads of the Restoration moved around the enemies swarming Rio.

"Damn it! Don't let the enemies move freely!"

Of course, the Beltrum army noticed the Restoration's movements. They weren't about to let them pass without a fight.

"We can't reach them!"

"Guh...!"

However, the light bullets under Rio's control obstructed their movement.

The orbs smoothly avoided the troops wearing the Restoration's uniform and hindered only the Beltrum army. That helped the Aerial Knights of the Restoration realize Rio was completely on their side.

"Whoever you are, thank you!"

"All troops get behind that man while you can!"

"Form a line of defense before the harbor!"

In the sky, filled with an overwhelming number of projectiles and enemies, the Aerial Knights of the Restoration flew freely. Among them, the highest-ranking officer flew over to Rio. "Kind stranger, you have my gratitude. Will you continue giving us your assistance?"

"Yes."

"Is it true the princesses have evacuated to the harbor?" the officer asked. He required more information to make informed decisions.

"Yes, the hero and Duke Huguenot are with them."

"I see... That's all I needed to know."

With his mask on, Rio must have appeared extremely suspicious. But while it would have roused suspicion in times of peace, it was a trivial matter on this battlefield.

There was no doubt Rio was assisting them even now, and they had spotted the evacuees with their own eyes already. There was enough information for the officer to believe Rio's words.

"I will continue obstructing the enemy's movements. Move your squads to the harbor and prepare yourselves for further battle."

"But those attacks are being controlled by you, right? If you join forces with us..."

The man scowled at the frantic movements of the Beltrum army. If Rio continued to help them, they could turn the tables on the other side and regain control over Rodania. That was clearly the thought in his mind.

"..."

Rio was unable to respond immediately and gazed at the battlefield in silence. Indeed, he could drive the enemy away at any moment if he wanted to. The temptation flashed through his mind. But at that moment, the mask creaked as though to remind Rio of the rules of the transcendent ones. Then...

Crack!

A rift ran down his mask.

"I cannot fight for much longer. I will be unable to assist in the recapture of the city."

Which meant the remaining troops of the Restoration would have to take on the Beltrum army alone, Rio implied with a bitter tone.

It was most likely that the forces invading the city right now weren't the entirety of the Beltrum army. Their airships had to hold reserve knights waiting to be deployed. If Rio could fight without a care for his masks, he could probably repel them all, but overcoming the current battle wouldn't resolve things in the long run. As long as Duke Arbor was dead set on destroying the Restoration, Rodania would continue to be attacked.

If Rio wanted to protect Rodania, he had to bring Duke Arbor down from his position of power. But doing that was like changing the history of a nation;he'd be interfering with far more than just a battlefield—he'd be changing politics as a whole. There was no telling how many masks such a move would require, and there were far too many uncertainties to consider it.

What Rio really wanted to protect here was Celia and the others. Not Rodania. The issue overlapped in some aspects, but he wasn't about to mix them up.

"Right, there's no way anyone could have enough magic essence to control those bullets for so long. Understood."

The officer knew nothing about the transcendent ones, so he assumed the reason why Rio was limited was because of his magic essence. The essence expended from the body could be replenished with an essence source like an essence crystal or spirit stone, but Rio couldn't go and retrieve them in this situation.

"Time is of the essence—go!"

Without bothering to correct the man, Rio flew forward. The Aerial Knights were shocked at how he was flying without a mount and gazed at his departing back, but eventually—

"All right, head for the harbor! If we don't protect Their Highnesses, this war is over for us! Hurry!"

At the order of the officer, the remaining troops all sped for the harbor.

◇ ◇ ◇

Meanwhile, Christina and Celia's group was on their way to the harbor; it was crowded with evacuees. They all had desperate looks on their faces, but they hadn't fallen into a panic yet, because they had a clear view of the sky above the city from the harbor. They could see Rio in the distance, controlling countless orbs of light to stop the enemies all by himself. Thanks to that, the enemy troops

couldn’t get near the harbor. This was the main reason behind the lack of panic among the evacuees.

However, whether it was because Rio had bought them some time, or because of crowd mentality, the evacuees couldn’t help worrying about what was happening in the sky. The noncombatant residents of the noble district were lined up to board the airship, but their progress along the ramp was slow because they kept looking up.

“Stop looking away. Move quickly.”

Christina walked along the queue, urging the evacuees to board faster. The warning of the First Princess forced the evacuees to focus on the matter at hand. Thanks to that, the line started moving faster.

“All right everyone, get into line calmly. We’ll all be able to board, so don’t panic.”

Celia joined in directing the evacuees to the end of the line. As guards, Sara, Orphia, and Alma were out scouting the area for any incoming enemies.

Rei and Kouta were tasked with carrying the unconscious Hiroaki, so they had already boarded the airship with Flora and Roanna. They looked up at the sky from the deck of the ship.

“He’s like a Gundam,” Rei mumbled.

“Rei...” Kouta shot him an exasperated look for joking at a time like this.

“I’m not wrong! Hiroaki would definitely say the same if he was awake. It looks just like the all-range attack of a funnel,” Rei argued stubbornly, when—

“A squad is approaching! Are they allies?!” Orphia shouted. She had been watching the skies from the deck with her bow at the ready, and had spotted a group of Aerial Knights flying their way. The knights wore the uniform of the Restoration.

“That’s... Yes! They’re allies, so don’t attack!” Christina said immediately as she looked up at the incoming group. There were several dozen Aerial Knights headed for the harbor. The highest-ranking officer of the group landed his griffin beside Christina.

“Princess Christina!”

“Report the situation,” Christina ordered immediately.

“The remaining aerial forces have come to protect the harbor. The front line is as you can see... He’s holding the enemy back single-handedly.”

“I see...”

“Do you know who he is?” the officer asked, gazing at Rio with Christina.

“I do not.”

The officer's eyes widened. "Your Highness doesn't know either?"

"Unfortunately..." Christina murmured. For some reason, when she watched Rio struggling in flight in the distance, she felt a mysterious sense of déjà vu. There was something about him that felt trustworthy, yet at the same time, her chest felt as if it was being crushed with guilt.

Just then, Celia came running over. "Princess Christina."

Christina snapped back to her senses. "Yes?"

"There are no new evacuees arriving at the harbor. Boarding of the remaining evacuees will soon be complete."

"From what we saw in the air, there are no more evacuees heading towards the harbor."

Celia and the officer gave their respective reports of the situation. Christina's expression promptly stiffened, and she looked around at the area.

There were five enchanted airships being used for evacuation. The lines to board them were also split into five, shortening the waiting time.

"Your attention, everyone! As soon as everyone here has finished boarding, we will depart from Rodania. Our destination will be the capital of the Galarc Kingdom, Galtuuk. Inform the captains of each ship of this. The enemy fleet is also closing in on us, so speed up the evacuation. Ensure we leave in the next few minutes!" Christina called out loudly, giving orders to the personnel around her.

"Right away!"

"The Aerial Knights will guard the airships until we leave the battlefield. I will leave the command to you."

"Understood."

The officer grabbed the reins of his griffin and returned to the sky. Once everyone set off to complete Christina's orders, she turned to face Celia.

"Please head inside the ship with Sara's group, professor. The Aerial Knights will handle the rest of the escorting."

"Okay."

◇ ◇ ◇

On the flagship of the Beltrum army's enchanted airship fleet approaching Rodania, those inside the pilothouse were also watching the situation in the sky above the city.

"What on earth is going on?! Who is that?!"

Duke Arbor, the commander of the fleet, was yelling angrily while looking

over Rodania. His eyes were fixed on Rio, who was controlling orbs of light to stop the frantically scattering Aerial Knights of the Beltrum army.

“We are unable to seize control of the air,” the captain of the flagship said awkwardly.

“I can see that much!”

Veins of anger throbbed on Duke Arbor’s forehead as he snapped back. The situation had been in their favor after the hero Renji’s surprise attack—they were one step away from completely occupying Rodania. But before he knew it, an extraordinary figure on the enemy’s side had completely flipped that situation.

According to their original plans, they should have gained air supremacy, landed in the harbor, and cut off the enemy’s escape route by now. Yet they hadn’t even completed the first step of that plan.

At this rate, the enemy would escape from the harbor. The regalia might even slip through their fingers. The thought of that sent Duke Arbor into an even greater rage.

“With all due respect, I believe it would be best to alter the course of the fleet for now. If we continue into the city like this, the fleet is sure to be damaged,” the flagship captain advised with a strained look.

Although he was the captain of the flagship, the commander of the fleet as a whole was Duke Arbor—and the power to move the fleet was with him. Thus, the captain was incapable of moving the fleet on his own order. But if they continued flying into the battlefield like this, the valuable airships were at risk of sinking.

“Hmm...” Duke Arbor hummed with a chagrined look. But his long years serving as a military leader weren’t for nothing.

“Change the course of the fleet. All ships increase furnace input and detour around the city, heading for the harbor. Ships one to five split to starboard, ships six to ten split to port.”

Duke Arbor swallowed his burning emotions and gave calm orders in order to achieve the objective.

“How will we address the enemy force controlling the light bullets?”

“Leave it to the Aerial Knights in the city. A ridiculous stunt like that takes up too much magic essence to be a threat for long. Tell them to drag out the fight until the other side is worn down. All they need to do is keep him occupied.”

“Understood.”

“The highest priority is to seize the harbor. In this case, you may destroy the facilities if necessary. Fire as soon as the enemy airships are spotted.”

“The princesses are likely to be evacuating on those airships...”

The thought of attacking royalty had the captain stiffening in hesitation, but —

“Do as you are ordered!” Duke Arbor had no such hesitations as he yelled at the captain with a peremptory tone.

“Yes sir! You heard him—prepare the signal flares!”

The ship crew hurried to fulfill Duke Arbor’s orders. Signal flares soon rose from the flagship. The other ships accelerated from their slow advance and changed course.

“I won’t let you get away...” Duke Arbor muttered hatefully as he stared out at the sky above Rodania.

◇ ◇ ◇

The enemy fleet split up?

While Rio was distracting the Aerial Knights, he sensed a change of movement in the Beltrum army’s fleet. The ships that were one kilometer away from the city split into two and started going around the outer perimeter. Once Rio confirmed that, he glanced at the harbor.

It seems like the evacuation ships are ready to depart, but...

The enemy fleet’s destination was the harbor, and their objective was clearly to stop the evacuation ships. On one side was a fleet already flying at a hundred and some kilometers an hour, while on the other were ships just beginning to accelerate for takeoff. At this rate, the Beltrum fleet would catch up with the evacuation ships.

“Dragon King!”

Sora immediately sensed the danger and approached Rio for an order.

“Yeah, the enemy fleet is moving.”

“Shall Sora sink some of the ships?” Sora said, offering a rather radical solution in a casual tone. Rio blinked in surprise before smiling wryly.

“Wouldn’t that be a heavy infringement of the rules of god?”

“Yes. But that’s about the only thing that will get them to turn back.”

“That’s true...”

Rio started thinking of a solution to the fleet as he controlled the light orbs to hinder the Aerial Knights. He wanted to suppress his mask consumption to a single mask if possible, but there was already a large crack in the one he was wearing, and pieces of the mask were beginning to flake off. It was clearly approaching its limits. What would be the best option? Rio stared at the lake in

thought for a few seconds, before—

"I have an idea," he said slowly.

"As expected of the Dragon King!"

"Aha ha. Thank you."

Sora praised Rio for his idea without listening to the details. She had unconditional trust in him, which made Rio chuckle in embarrassment.

"For now, I have to finish stopping the knights in front of me. It might be a heavy burden on the mask, though..."

As he said that, Rio called the orbs of the light around the enemies back to him.

"Wha..."

A chill ran down the spines of the Aerial Knights. The bullets that had been chasing them around were suddenly gathering before Rio. What was about to happen was evident. Thus...

"Retreat! Retreat now! Scatter yourselves and flee!" a knight with the authority to command others directed in a panic, sending a signal flare to retreat into the air with magic.

One beat later, the light bullets Rio had called back all shot out at once. This time they weren't aimed to miss—they were aimed to strike as many of the knights as possible. As a result—

"Ugh!"

"Gah!"

"No!"

Knights started falling out of the air one after another. Those who weren't struck were occupied with rescuing their comrades, causing the front line to break down in a matter of moments.

The enemy lost their ability to fight in a single attack. But at the same time, the mask Rio wore had to bear a stronger burden. The mask creaked each time one of his attacks struck an enemy, and the material on the surface deteriorated before falling off.

I see...

It seemed that defeating a large number of enemies counted as a strong degree of interference after all. Rio gently touched his mask with his left hand as he thought that.

Throughout this battle, he had gained a fairly good understanding of how much fighting would result in how much of a burden on the mask. It seemed that the best option for fighting an extended battle was to avoid defeating enemies

and focus on stalling them. It was a reckless system, but this had been a good learning experience. He'd be able to fight better next time.

"All right, let's go. Follow me, Sora." His job here was done.

"Right!"

Accompanied by the enthusiastic Sora, Rio headed for the lake where the evacuation ships of the Restoration were about to depart.

◇ ◇ ◇

Some time earlier...

"The evacuees have all boarded!"

"All ships are ready to depart."

Preparations for departure from the harbor were finally complete.

"We're leaving immediately. Send notice to all the ships," Christina decided immediately.

"Roger that! Alert the ships!"

The departure bell started ringing noisily, and the enchanted airship slowly began to move along the surface of the lake. During that time, Christina made her way to the pilothouse.

"Christina!" Besides the captain and crew, Flora and Duke Huguenot were also in the pilothouse.

"We can't relax yet. What's the situation?" Christina asked.

"The enemy fleet is approaching from port and starboard," Duke Huguenot reported.

"Their goal is to stop our departure, I assume. The Aerial Knights will protect our rear. Focus on getting away—ascend as quickly as possible."

"Understood! The journey may be turbulent, so hold on. Raise the output!"

Enchanted airships needed to reach a speed of thirty kilometers per hour before they could lift off from the surface of the water. Normally, they could achieve this speed by gradually accelerating—rushing the process made the ride rather uncomfortable. In fact, the shaking could even pose a danger to the passengers, but now wasn't the time to be considerate of such things. In this case, the airship moved along the water faster than normal.

However, the enemy fleet was already flying at a high speed, and they were coming at them from two sides to surround them. In the time it took the evacuation ships to ascend, the distance to the Beltrum fleet shrank rapidly.

"Tch. We will soon be within magic-casting range of the enemy fleet!" someone reported to the rest of the pilothouse. Everyone stiffened.

Meanwhile, on the flagship of the Beltrum Kingdom...

“Okay, fire! The target is the enemy’s enchanted airships! Prevent them from sailing!” Duke Arbor ordered with a smug grin.

“*Ignis Iecit*!”

The sorcerers standing on the deck of the ship used their attack spells on the Restoration’s evacuation ships rising from the water. Fireballs of one meter in diameter started flying at a speed of a hundred kilometers per hour.

Incidentally, enchanted airships were also equipped with their own cannons. But their output was equivalent to advanced magic even when suppressed, so a direct hit on a ship could potentially kill everyone on board. With Christina and Flora on board, there was the chance the regalia could be destroyed or lost in the blast. Thus, the cannon wasn’t to be used this time.

“Guh...” Christina stepped out of the pilothouse and looked up at the sky to the rear. A hundred fireballs were raining down on the evacuation ships of the Restoration. Even a single shot could destroy the section of the ship it struck, and the sparks could spread the damage. Multiple hits would sink a ship in moments.

“All troops, block the incoming attacks! Even if you have to use your own bodies! Protect the ship with Princess Christina and Princess Flora on board with your lives!” The commander of the Aerial Knights defending the rear of the ships sent desperate orders to his subordinates.

But they were clearly outnumbered. The enemy fleet was greater in number and had many more sorcerers on the attack. The sorcerers recited spell after spell, which the Aerial Knights had to confirm the trajectory of before they could defend against them. It was obvious that they were unable to keep this up.

“Orphia, Alma. Move to the ships to the left and right. If the need arises, use your spirit arts to create a barrier.”

Also to the rear of the ships were Sara, Orphia, and Alma. In preparation for the worst-case scenario, Sara gave her approval to use spirit arts in front of other people.

“Okay!”

“Got it.”

The two nodded and leaped across to the ships flying beside theirs.

“W-Wait!”

Just then, Celia, who had been watching the battlefield with bated breath, pointed in the direction of the city and yelled out. Something was flying from the sky above the city towards the lake at a faster speed than the falling fireballs.

Upon closer inspection, it was two figures—Rio and Sora.

"Huh?"

"Th-Those two...?"

The girls were startled by how fast the figures were moving. The same went for the Aerial Knights, and Christina and Flora who could see them from the pilothouse.

Rio and Sora stopped a hundred meters before the Aerial Knights, hovering an inch above the water surface, and faced the Beltrum fleet.

Hold on for just a little more...!

Rio stared at the enemy fleet and poured his magic essence into the lake beneath his feet.

"Huh?!" Regardless of their status as an enemy or ally, everyone was speechless; a dragon-shaped mass of water appeared from the lake.

"I-Isn't that Sir Hiroaki's...?" Flora let out a voice that cracked in a half scream. And she was right—Yamata no Orochi, the secret ability of Hiroaki's Divine Arms, had appeared on the lake.

The ability that was named after his weapon was based on the Japanese legend of the eight-headed dragon. When Hiroaki used it, it was a powerful move that made water take on the shape of the eight dragon heads. If it had been more accurate to the legend, it would have included the body and eight tails as well.

The dragon Rio had prepared was the full form that included the huge body and tails. Each head of the dragon was located at the end of a thirty-meter-long neck.

Its total height was shorter than the beast of the land, which stood at over a hundred meters tall, but it was still overwhelmingly large. The evacuation ships were still ascending away from Rio even now, but everyone watching the battlefield was completely frozen with fear.

"W-Wow! You're so cool, Dragon King! This is amazing!"

Only Sora's eyes sparkled with excitement. The Yamata no Orochi swallowed the incoming fireball with its tremendous size. Once Rio confirmed that the attack was being blocked successfully, he looked up at the sky.

"Let's move upwards." He began a rapid ascent.

"Okay!"

Sora was right behind him. The two proceeded to rise to a point far above in the sky and looked over the battlefield from above. Most people were too distracted by the Yamata no Orochi to notice the two of them had disappeared,

especially since they had flown at a speed that surpassed a hundred kilometers per hour.

“They went up.”

“Yes, it seems he’s the one controlling that art.”

“I can’t believe there’s someone outside the village who can cast an art like that.”

Alma, Sara, and Orphia were some of the few people who had watched Rio leave. They had watched the Yamata no Orochi out of the corner of their eye as they followed Rio and Sora’s figures rising into the air. There was blatant surprise in their expressions.

“...” Beside them, Celia stared at the sky in silence.

After that, Rio started swinging his arms, controlling Yamata no Orochi with his palms. The eight heads of the dragon all opened their mouths.

“Wha...?!” The people on the battlefield were rendered speechless. The heads of the Yamata no Orochi Rio was controlling had released a breath of water at the incoming fleet. Eight beams of compressed water blasted through the air at a supersonic speed.

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"..."

Each breath was aimed to miss the ships by a hair's breadth, but the personnel aboard the Beltrum fleet's ships were dumbfounded by the events, which surpassed their human understanding. After some delay, fear clutched at their hearts.

"T-Turn the rudder! Back up and retreat! Send the signal flares!" the captain of the flagship ordered without waiting for Duke Arbor's directions.

"R-Retreat! Back up the ships and retreat!"

The crew member in charge of transmission repeated his words in confusion. The others on the ship also began to move while panicking. Everyone understood at an instinctual level that they could not win here.

Thus, the Beltrum fleet began their swift retreat.

"..." Not even Duke Arbor had anything to say about the decisions being made without his approval. He agreed with the judgment, and above all he felt fear for his own life at that moment.

However, the more they distanced themselves from the Yamata no Orochi, the more feelings of regret rose within him. They had been one step away from capturing Christina. Yet something had obstructed them like a divine intervention.

Outrageous. I was so close... She was almost within my grasp, yet...

Regret gradually changed to rage.

"Damn it!"

Duke Arbor slammed his dominant hand down against the desk of the pilothouse. In the meantime, the airships with Christina and the others on board continued accelerating into the air and left the lake.

◇ ◇ ◇

In the noble district of Rodania...

"My, my, he sure is going out with a bang."

From a plateau with a clear view, Reiss was watching the Restoration's evacuation ships leave. Lucci and Arein stood beside him. Renji was still unconscious and being carried by Lucci, who had a larger frame.

"Is it okay for us to just watch on like this?" Arein asked, watching for Reiss's reaction.

"Yes, he's clearly an opponent beyond our means. There's nothing we can do. It's like going up against a natural disaster," Reiss answered in a delighted tone.

“I suppose that makes sense. Just who is the guy behind this...”

There’s only one possibility for that, but you two have forgotten him.

Reiss looked up at the sky where Rio was hiding and twisted his mouth in a smirk.

“It’s possible that the water hero was cornered into awakening. Renji will be able to do that much if he’s ever cornered,” he said to Arein.

“Heroes really are crazy, huh?”

Arein glanced at the unconscious Renji. There was a twinge of apprehension in his face. It was reassuring to have him as an ally, but it wasn’t so fun to imagine him as an enemy.

“He is an important fighting asset of ours. Treat him with courtesy.”

“Roger that...” Arein grumbled.

Lucci adjusted his grip on Renji with a reluctantly accepting look. “Hah, what a troublesome brat.”

Seeing their reactions, Reiss looked back up at the sky where Rio lurked and smirked.

That mask shouldn’t be easy to replicate. Now that I know he won’t overlook the predicament of his former comrades, our course for the future is decided.

◇ ◇ ◇

In the sky above the lake, Rio and Sora hovered side by side. Rio was controlling the Yamata no Orochi while watching the Beltrum army’s fleet retreat.

“Ha ha ha! Take that! This is the Dragon King’s true power!” Sora boasted triumphantly, puffing out her chest.

“I hope the enemy will lose their will to fight with this...”

“Of course they will! They ran with their tails between their legs!”

“I was hoping they’d withdraw their ships without a fight if I intimidated them, so I’m glad it worked out well.”

Yamata no Orochi was visually impressive, so it was the perfect move for intimidation. Having seen it once before made it easier to construct with his imagination, and the lake gave him a geographical advantage for the manipulation of water.

“Yes! The Dragon King came up with such a wonderful design! So gallant! So sublime! Sora is certain that the resemblance to a dragon isn’t just her imagination!”

“I actually imitated someone else’s move. But thanks... Aha ha...”

Sora kept complimenting Rio with such rapt attention that he ended up thanking her with a slightly guilty look.

“Wow! The person who originally cast that certainly has great taste, then!”

“The person in question is on board that ship right now. That’s why I was hoping it would look like he was the one who cast it,” Rio said, glancing at the enchanted airship with Hiroaki and the others on board.

“Oooh!” Sora’s eyes sparkled as she looked up at Rio’s face.

“Wh-What?”

“Were you thinking that far ahead when you used that move?!”

“Err, what do you mean?”

“You wanted to weaken the penalty of the rules of god by making people believe that someone else did it, right? You even moved out of view to avoid being seen...”

“Y-Yeah. I figured that if I was going to intervene, doing so without drawing attention would infringe the rules less.”

“In order to reduce the consumption of the mask, right?!”

Rio nodded hesitantly, startled by Sora’s energy. “Yeah... I don’t know how effective it was, but it seemed better than doing nothing.”

“Sora believes it had an effect!” Sora beamed in approval.

First of all, the mask Rio was wearing existed to shoulder the penalty of violating the rules of god: specifically, the penalty of the second rule, where the transcendent one lost their memories of the people they tried to support the interests of.

However, it also had an effect on the other rules as well. That meant that even without assisting someone, the mask could end up bearing the burden of another rule that was being applied to the transcendent one.

For example, the rule that the transcendent ones have difficulty remaining in the memory of others. They could make direct contact and hold a conversation with people, but the memory of the transcendent one would quickly fade from that person.

But what would happen if the transcendent one did something that would purposefully draw attention and leave a lasting memory? That would be equivalent to opposing the rule that god had decided. The rule was strictly made for the transcendent ones to be inconspicuous, so leaving an impression was considered an act of defiance.

This was why the transcendent ones avoided interacting with the world when they weren’t out fulfilling their duties. Instead of standing before other people,

they would send their disciples to act on their behalf as much as possible.

And so, there were negative consequences when the transcendent one failed to do this. First, the person who had their memory erased would bear the burden. If they sensed something odd about the missing memory and forced themselves to recall it, they would suffer an agonizing headache.

Secondly, it was unclear what kind of penalty occurred to the transcendent one, but it was definitely a factor in the burden the mask had to bear. This was something that Sora had told him.

Thus, intervening with the conflict between mankind like this—and standing out while doing so—had the danger of causing two layers of burden on the mask.

And so, Rio had to plan around drawing attention while he fought. He had used Yamata no Orochi in hopes of making it seem like Hiroaki had caused the phenomenon instead of himself. It was a bit of a stab in the dark, but he was willing to try anything that could reduce the penalty.

“It hasn’t been that long since you became a transcendent one, yet you’re able to see that far ahead when moving on the spur of the moment! Sora is most impressed! You have a magnificent eye for war tactics!” Sora praised Rio’s thought process with every fiber of her being.

“Thank you. I wanted to reduce the mask’s consumption as much as possible. The one I’m wearing is half-broken already,” Rio said with a smile. The left half of the mask he was wearing was missing, but it remained effective and fixed on his face. There was a look of bashfulness on the exposed left side of his face.

“It’s impressive that the mask is still holding on after so much intervention into a war between mankind!”

“I see. That’s good to hear then.”

“The mask will remain effective until it falls off completely, so you can still fight!”

“I’d prefer if there were no more battles after this, though...” With the Yamata no Orochi standing alert below him, Rio watched the retreating Beltrum Kingdom fleet.

Please, just keep retreating like that...

On the off chance they turned back and chased after the fleeing Restoration ships, he had more intimidation tactics prepared. However, the longer the battle and the more he damaged the enemy, the greater the burden on his mask. He wanted to avoid fighting as much as possible.

The breath he’d made the Yamata no Orochi use at the beginning was a mere

warning. He had no intention of harming the enemy if they had no intent to continue fighting. Sure enough, the effect of that warning was perfect—the Beltrum Kingdom's fleet continued retreating without turning. They flew past the lake and over Rodania, fleeing to the outskirts of the city.

Meanwhile, Rio looked over at the Restoration's evacuation ships. They had already flown over the lake in the direction of the Galarc Kingdom border.

They'll be fine now that they've fled that far.

Once he confirmed the ships had fled to safety, he turned to Sora.

"Okay. Shall we get going, Sora?"

"Sure!"

Rio dispelled the Yamata no Orochi down at the lake before rising into the sky and disappearing into the clouds.

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Chapter 2: Reunion

Once Rio released his control, the Yamata no Orochi was unable to maintain its form and collapsed back into the water. The many evacuees on the deck of the Restoration's airship fell silent. Everyone watching the lake was at a loss for words.

"Roanna! Is Roanna here?!" Christina eventually called out, raising her voice to summon the daughter of the Fontaine ducal family. She looked around the deck, but couldn't spot her anywhere.

"Sir Hiroaki was carried into the cabin during departure. I shall call for her!" A young noblewoman ran through the door leading inside the cabin.

Shortly after, Roanna rushed out onto the deck. "Princess Christina!"

"How is Sir Hiroaki faring?" Christina asked, cutting straight to the chase. She wanted to know whether he had been the one controlling Yamata no Orochi.

"He hasn't woken up yet..."

There was no conclusive evidence to be gained from that. Christina thought for a moment before responding. "I see... Inform me immediately when he does. You may return now."

"Understood." With a single bow, Roanna returned to the cabin.

Meanwhile, Sara, Orphia, and Alma were gathered in a corner of the deck. The three of them were staring at the clouds above the lake.

"It seems he's left..." Orphia muttered.

"He was an incredible spirit arts caster... Stronger than anyone in the village."

"Who was he?"

Sara and Alma both pondered the situation with her. A lake was the ideal environment for a water spirit art caster, but the move that had been used was on a far larger scale than normal. No one in the spirit folk village could cause a phenomenon of such a scale by themselves. Thus, the three of them were extremely interested in the person who had cast the Yamata no Orochi.

"..."

Celia and her father Roland Claire were staring at the lake in silence beside them.

However, they had rather contrasting expressions on their faces. Roland was

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still taken aback by the appearance of the Yamata no Orochi, while Celia was watching the sky where Rio had been with worry.

Where did you go, Rio?

She was terrified. Just moments ago, she had forgotten Rio's entire existence. It was like a part of her had been painted over into a blank canvas, erasing all her memories about Rio. And she hadn't even questioned it.

They had been such precious feelings of hers. He was so special to her, and they had shared so many memories together, yet...

There's no way I could have forgotten him...

What if she was in danger of forgetting him again? The moment that thought crossed Celia's mind, an indescribable sense of uneasiness surged within her.

"H-Hey, everyone!" Unable to bear the feeling any longer, Celia called out to Sara's group.

"Yes, Celia?"

"Do you... Do you remember Rio...?"

"Rio...?" Sara and the others looked puzzled.

"Just a little while ago, we all lived together with him. We made meals together, baked snacks together, chatted together, and trained in the mornings together..." Celia's voice cracked under the stress she felt.

"Uhm..." The spirit folk girls exchanged confused looks.

"Have you really forgotten him? Why...?"

It was almost like Rio had never existed to begin with.

When did this start happening?

How long had they been forgetting things? She had been too preoccupied with the evacuation to think about her missing memories earlier, so she thought about them now.

Saint Erica tried to occupy the capital of Duke Gregory's territory...

That's right—Rio had gone to Duke Gregory's territory in the Galarc Kingdom in order to recapture the city. Celia and the others had accompanied him, but the Saint was a tough opponent. She possessed inhuman strength and could control a monster called the beast of the land. They had all struggled helplessly against her.

The last thing she could remember was Saint Erica summoning a monster far larger than the beast of the land. Then...

Aishia... Aishia! That's right, Aishia went and—!

The forgotten memories came rushing back all at once. At the same time, she recalled the existence of the other girl she had forgotten. Her presence was so

natural to her, it had taken a moment before she realized her memories of her were missing.

“W-Wait! What about Aishia? You know, Aishia!” Celia looked at the three girls in question.

“Aishia...” Their faces were blank.

“She’s a humanoid spirit who has a contract with Rio. She lived with us as well—we were friends! She’s a precious friend of ours!” Celia was so desperate in her pleads, Sara had trouble responding.

“I don’t know her... And there’s no way I would forget such a spirit if she existed,” she answered hesitantly.

“Right.”

“Yeah...”

Orphia and Alma both nodded with bewildered expressions as well.

“Do you remember the fight at Duke Gregory’s territory in the Galarc Kingdom?”

“I remember there being a fight, yes...”

“The fight was over before we all knew it, which was strange. Do you remember that?”

“Yes...”

Sara and the girls looked back on their memories of that time. Indeed, the fight had ended before they knew what had happened. They knew that for a fact. But there was a fog over their memories before and after that moment. Their minds blanked out at the mysterious incident.

“That was a fight with Saint Erica. She was a hero as well as a Saint, and this huge monster appeared as well. We were no match for either of them...” Celia informed them. She could recall the events before her memory was cut off clearly now.

“At the last moment before your memories end, Saint Erica summoned a monster even bigger than the beast of the land. It tore the land open, flipping heaven and earth.”

The land had lifted and surged towards them like a tsunami. It had been beyond the level of a natural disaster, and everyone had despaired. But they didn’t give up—Rio and Aishia had gone to stop Saint Erica.

“Rio and Aishia went to stop that disaster by themselves. The two of them headed for the tsunami of earth...”

The first to fly off was Aishia. She had said something to Rio and left for the tsunami all by herself. Rio had been injured, but he’d hurried after her in a panic.

“After a few moments, a bright light filled our vision. Once the light faded, the disaster had vanished completely.”

It was hard to believe there had been any disaster in the first place. Rio, Aishia, and Saint Erica had vanished from everyone’s memories—and she had no idea why.

However...

“I’m sure Aishia did something to save us,” Celia said with certainty. “But then we forgot about Rio and Aishia. We were standing there with no idea what had just happened. Even though it was thanks to them that we were saved...”

No one remembered the two of them, or Saint Erica, or the monster that Erica had controlled.

“I had forgotten about Rio and Aishia too, until I remembered just now... But if I can remember, then you can too...!”

Perhaps they could remember Rio and Aishia. Perhaps they actually had memories of them left. Celia clung to such hopes as she questioned the spirit folk girls, but...

“...” Sara and the others stared into space with dazed expressions. They had been listening to Celia with confused but serious looks to begin with, but it was clear they weren’t listening anymore.

“Hello...?” Celia blinked.

“Oh, umm...”

“Sorry, I suddenly had a dizzy spell.”

“What were you just saying?”

The girls snapped back to their senses.

“I was talking about Rio and Aishia. The two of them saved us, yet we’ve forgotten them,” Celia said, summarizing everything she had just said, but—

“Rio...”

“And Aishia?”

“Who are they?”

The three of them had evidently unnatural reactions.

“H-Huh? No way... Weren’t you listening to a word of what I said?”

It was as if the conversation just now hadn’t happened. Celia questioned them with extreme confusion.

“What were you saying...?”

“Err...”

Sara and the others tried to recall their conversation listlessly.

“...”

Then, they stared off into space again.

“What’s going on...?”

What’s happening here? Celia was even more bewildered. It was strange. There was definitely something wrong. Things were bordering on creepy.

Celia started feeling scared. But just then, someone tapped her on the shoulder from behind. She turned around.

“Huh...? Ri—!” Standing there was Rio, wearing a broken mask. Celia tried to call his name on reflex.

“Shh...” Rio silenced her with a finger to her lips.

“Mmgh...” Celia shut her mouth with a blush.

Rio glanced at the dazed spirit folk girls and leaned in to whisper in Celia’s ear. “I will explain the reason why Sara and the others are like this. Let’s talk somewhere quiet. Come with me.” He then took her hand and started walking without waiting for her reply.

“O-Okay...” Celia allowed herself to be led away.

“Huh...? Celia?”

Several seconds later, by the time the spirit folk girls returned to their senses, Rio and Celia were gone.

◇ ◇ ◇

Rio brought Celia into the cabin of the ship and walked down a passageway.

“Dragon King, this room is free.”

Sora must have been searching for an unoccupied room. She was waiting by the door and opened it for them as they approached. It appeared to be a cellar of the ship.

“Thanks. This way.”

“Okay...”

Rio pulled Celia through the door by her hand.

Who’s this girl...?

Celia’s interest was piqued by Sora.

Sora glared at Celia as though to say, “The hell are you staring at, huh? Who do you think you are holding the Dragon King’s hand like that?” It was an expression that Rio could see.

“U-Umm...” Celia gave her a friendly, twitching smile.

“Is something the matter?” Rio asked, turning back.

“Sh-She’s a cute girl.”

“Her name is Sora.”

Once the three of them entered the room, Rio closed the door and introduced Sora.

“Sora... Hi, I’m Celia. Celia Claire.”

“...Hello.” Sora gave her a stiff bow.

“She’s a little shy, but she’s a good girl,” Rio explained with a troubled look.

“Right...” All of a sudden, Celia threw herself at Rio without any warning. She was so overcome with emotion at the sight of Rio before her, she couldn’t hold herself back any longer.

“Wha?!” Sora let out a horrified shriek.

“So you remember me after all?” Rio asked, allowing Celia to hug him.

“Yeah. When you tried to leave in the earlier battle, all these memories emerged in my head...and I remembered you and Aishia. And the fight with Saint Erica too.”

“I see...” Unable to understand why Celia was the only one to regain her memories, Rio had a look of discontent on his face.

“What happened? You and Aishia suddenly disappeared, then everyone lost their memories... Where’s Aishia?” Celia looked up at Rio’s face from his chest.

“Aishia is safe. She’s watching over everyone in the Galarc Castle in her spirit form.”

“You’re protecting us even though we’ve forgotten you... Thank you.”

“It’s nothing...” Rio smiled happily, shaking his head.

“Is your mask okay? It’s falling apart...”

Celia seemed to be worried whether he was injured. She gently touched Rio’s exposed cheek under the cracked mask.

“I’m fine. This didn’t break from an attack or anything.”

“And your eyes...”

Celia peered into Rio’s eyes from close up.

“H-Hey, you! Who do you think you’re clinging to?!”

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Sora recovered from her frozen state.

“W-Wait...!”

“Get away from him! Now!” Sora tried to quickly pull Rio and Celia apart.

“C-Calm down, Sora...!”

“Hmph!” Sora puffed up her cheeks cutely as she squeezed herself between them. With that, Celia was separated from Rio against her will. But she missed Rio’s warmth and took another half step forward to cling to him again.

“No! Stop!” Sora spread her arms to stop her. Using her tiny body, that of a seven- or eight-year-old child, she obstructed Celia’s way with all her might.

“G-Goodness...” Celia seemed to realize how shameful it was to try and push aside a child in order to cling to Rio. She puffed up her cheeks cutely as though to compete with Sora.

“So, err, a lot happened. We learned quite a few things, which I’ll explain along with this girl’s identity. It might sound crazy, but will you hear me out?” Rio looked a little amused—and a little nostalgic—as he smiled and changed the topic.

“Of course. So many crazy things are happening, after all. I won’t be surprised by anything. Tell me.” Celia seemed to have pulled herself together, as she nodded with a serious expression. Thus, Rio explained what he knew about the situation at this moment in time.

This world was once home to multiple higher beings known as the transcendent ones. Rio had been a transcendent one called the Dragon King in the life before his past life. Aishia had been holding onto his power as the Dragon King. In the final moments of the battle with the Saint, Rio used those transcendent powers. Saint Erica also used the power of a transcendent one—the power of the upper high spirit of earth. This caused the world to recognize all three of them as transcendent ones and bind them to the rules of the higher beings.

Going into the details of everything would take over an hour, so Rio gave an outline of all the information he had.

Although she said she wouldn’t be surprised, Celia gaped in wonder. “Transcendent...ones...”

“It’s hard to believe, isn’t it?”

“I believe it. I believe you... In short, you’ve become something like a god, right?”

“Right. Although god exists separately... It’s definitely something close to being a god.” Rio nodded slowly, describing in more concrete terms how exactly

he had changed.

"I see... Yup, okay. I understand." Celia considered Rio's words carefully, repeating them to herself to calm herself down. Then, in a voice too quiet for Rio to hear, she murmured, "You're becoming more and more of a being unlike any of us, aren't you..." and looked down subtly. Her eyes trembled with a mix of conflicted emotions that included sadness, and she was biting her lip. But she immediately returned to her resolute expression before Rio could notice, lifting her face up.

"Honestly, I don't really feel like I've become a transcendent one. My mind still thinks of myself as an individual human. However, I'm still subject to the restrictions of the rules. That is why everyone's forgotten me, and why I can't recklessly interact with the people of this world. That is the current reality for me and Aishia."

"And that's why you disappeared."

"Yes. Contact itself isn't forbidden, but some of the rules result in the same thing."

"Rules that make everyone forget you and forbid contact with anyone else... It's almost like the person who made the rules wants to hide the transcendent ones from the world," Celia said, guessing the intention of the rules in one go.

"Exactly. Most of the rules exist so that the transcendent ones cannot be identified. Each transcendent one possesses power on par with a god, so the god created rules to prevent them from influencing the state of the world," Rio said, explaining the specifics behind the intent of the rules.

"Power..."

"Think of it as a special power the transcendent ones can use. In my case, my power is annihilation, so I can release a light that erases my designated target. I used that power to erase the natural disaster Saint Erica created during our fight."

"So that's why there was a light back then..."

The scene just before she lost her memories flashed through Celia's mind. Possessed by an upper high rank spirit, Erica had directed a tsunami of earth towards them—until it had been swallowed up by light that filled the world.

"By using that light, the world recognized me as a transcendent one. The same goes for Aishia, who used the power with me. Saint Erica was also forgotten because the natural disaster was created through her own transcendent power."

Like Aishia, who had been assimilated with Rio, the reincarnation of the

Dragon King, Saint Erica, who had been assimilated with an upper high rank spirit, was also treated as a transcendent one. Thus, the rules of god applied to the three of them.

“And that’s how all three of you were forgotten...”

“Yes. Only very few exceptions can remember the transcendent ones...”

“And I’m one of them, right...?” Celia said hesitantly, tilting her head. She couldn’t think of a reason why she would be considered an exception.

“That’s exactly what I wanted to talk about next.”

Why was Celia able to remember Rio and Aishia? They had finally reached the main subject to be discussed.

“You don’t know either?”

“Yes. The others still have no memory of me, right?”

“Yeah, Sara and the others still don’t remember anything. The same goes for everyone back at the Galarc Castle. When I try to tell them about you, they start daydreaming instead of remembering anything... Is that because of the rules as well?”

Celia recalled the unnatural reaction the spirit folk girls had to the topic of Rio earlier.

“Apparently that happens when you try to trigger the recollection of those memories. If you force that recollection, the person will be subject to a terrible headache. That’s why I didn’t try to approach anyone, but...”

There was another reason as well: if Rio’s contact with Celia and the others was determined to be supporting an individual or group, he would lose his memories of them. However, bringing that up now would derail the conversation, so he chose not to say that.

Just then, Sora raised her hand. “Dragon King. Sora has a theory.”

“What is it?”

“This girl resembles Lina’s homunculus woman,” she said, eyeing Celia with disgust.

“Lina’s homunculus... As in, her disciple?”

Lina was Miharu’s past life, and one of the Seven Wise Gods. Sora had previously mentioned that she had a homunculus as a disciple. Rio’s eyes widened as he recalled that conversation.

“Yes.”

“But Celia’s...”

She was a regular human, born and raised in a noble family of Beltrum.

“It can’t be a coincidence! You remember how Sora said Lina’s power was to

predict the future? And now a woman with her homunculus's face is here with memories of you. She must have used her power to see the future and set this up! That means Lina's involved with this woman as well!" Sora screeched in rage at the mere thought of Lina.

"What is she saying? I thought homunculi were artificial humans that only appeared in fairy tales... And who's Lina?" Unable to keep up with their conversation, Celia looked between Rio and Sora in confusion.

"Lina is...one of the wise gods. There was a seventh one to the Six Wise Gods. Transcendent ones have disciples who serve them, and Sora is saying the homunculus that once served Lina looks exactly like you..."

Rio glanced at Sora. He didn't bother mentioning that Miharu was the reincarnation of Lina for the moment. There was too much information to process already.

"Really...? Wait, huh? How do you know this? How long ago did all of this happen?"

Celia was confused. Everything Rio had mentioned until now sounded like it happened in ancient times.

"About that... I should have mentioned this earlier, but Sora's actually the disciple of the former Dragon King." Rio introduced Sora to Celia once again.

Sora puffed her chest up proudly. "Hmph!"

"H-Huh? But she's..."

Celia failed to understand. In fact, she was even more confused now. From her attitude to her speech, everything about her seemed so childish.

"What's that look for?!" Sora snapped.

"Despite appearances, she's been alive since long before the Divine War happened. Her physical and mental development stopped when she became a disciple of the Dragon King."

"S-So she doesn't age? That's amazing..."

"Sora's a disciple of the great Dragon King, so being amazing is a given!" Sora said with a smug smile.

"I can guarantee her strength as well. She's on par with Aishia in combat."

"S-Sora's stronger than that woman! Sora wouldn't lose in a serious match," Sora objected, less smugly this time. She didn't want to argue too strongly with Rio's opinion, but it frustrated her to be considered equal to Aishia.

"You've got a reliable ally, then..."

"Yes. Apparently there's a special connection between transcendent ones and their disciples. By regaining my powers as the Dragon King, the bond with Sora

also returned. She's been teaching me a lot while we travel together."

"I see... A special connection..." Celia murmured, looking between Rio and Sora's faces.

"It's related to the memory loss rules—the only ones who can remember the transcendent ones are fellow transcendent ones and their disciples."

That was why when Rio and Aishia were newly recognized as transcendent ones, Sora was able to retain her memories as the disciple of the former Dragon King.

"But I'm neither of those things, am I?"

"That's right... Which is why what Sora said is intriguing."

"That I look like the homunculus that was Lina's disciple?"

"Yes."

"So I've become Lina's disciple...or something?"

"I guess...? What do you think, Sora?" Rio looked at her.

"Disciples have to follow the same rules of god as their transcendent masters. But this woman hasn't been forgotten by the people around her. Isn't that right?" Sora asked, turning to Celia.

"Yes... Sara and the others treat me the same as always."

"Then that explanation doesn't make sense. She's not a transcendent one, nor a disciple, yet she regained her memories anyway."

"Which means Lina predicted this future and set up some kind of plan around it, right?" Rio placed a hand under his chin in thought.

"Sora thinks so too."

"When you regained your memories, the light of a spell appeared around your body, right? Do you remember anything from that moment?"

"I don't know... Wait, now that you mention it..." Celia tilted her head. But she immediately looked like she recalled something.

"Hmm? What does that mean? Why am I..." She furrowed her brows in suspicion. Then, her eyes became unfocused as she stared into empty space. She remained in that dazed state until—

"Celia...? Is everything all right?" Rio asked worriedly.

Celia snapped back to her senses. "Oh! Yes!"

"What happened?"

"For some reason, I feel like I know how to use this spell I've never heard of before... And how should I describe this? It's like my thoughts are really clear and organized. Almost like there're multiples of myself thinking... It's creepy."

Celia lost her balance and stumbled on the spot. Rio quickly grabbed her by

the shoulders to support her.

"Whoa there... Are you really okay?" he asked, emphasizing his words.

"Y-Yeah... I'm fine. I can align my thoughts if I focus on them."

Celia took a deep breath and nodded, stepping away from Rio gently to prove she was fine. Seeing that, Rio let out a sigh of relief.

"Dragon King," Sora murmured.

"What is it?"

"Parallel thoughts and thought acceleration are special abilities of the disciples of the Wise Gods. Just like how Sora can become a dragonkin by using her spirit body, the disciples of the Wise Gods all have extraordinary minds. They are capable of using those abilities to think multiple things at the same time. Lina's disciple was even capable of simultaneously casting multiple different spells that way."

"That's...something else indeed."

Rio's eyes widened at the abilities of the Wise Gods' disciples. It was possible to activate multiple magic circles of the same spell, but it was commonly believed to be impossible to cast different magic spells at the same time.

"S-Sora's more amazing! As a disciple of the Dragon King, Sora can deflect both magic and spirit arts when in her dragon form!"

She must have been desperate to be praised by Rio. Sora's natural competitiveness flared against her fellow disciples.

Rio laughed as though to comfort a young child, nodding along. "Aha ha. Yeah."

It's like I'm looking at siblings... Or rather, a father and child?

Celia watched the exchange between them curiously.

"Sorry, we went off topic."

"Oh no, it's okay."

"The light of the spell that activated when you regained your memories wasn't your own doing, right?" Rio brought the conversation back to the main topic.

"Yeah. The spell just started flowing out of my body by itself..."

"Lina could use sorcery that transferred memories. She used that to pass Aishia memories of one thousand years ago, then let my soul reincarnate with her."

"Did she use that memory-transferring sorcery on me?"

"I don't know. She could have created a different sorcery that restores

memories instead."

"But in that case... Why? Do the Wise Gods still exist in this world?"

Celia's question was most reasonable. Although Lina wasn't included, the Six Wise Gods were worshipped as legends in the Strahl region. They disappeared from the world at the end of the Divine War one thousand years ago.

To Celia, they were figures from ancient legends. Being told they were still interfering with mankind from somewhere in the world wasn't easy to believe.

"Lina was able to use the power of clairvoyance. Perhaps she was able to set up some kind of sorcery to only activate in a specific time period or under certain conditions—that then activated one thousand years later."

Sora snorted in disgust, probably because she was unhappy about how Lina had dragged the Dragon King into the Divine War one thousand years ago.

"O-One-thousand-year-old sorcery..." Celia gulped in astonishment.

It was possible to build a sorcery spell formula that could only activate under certain conditions, but to aim for one that only activated at a certain time was much more difficult. Even selecting a month for a sorcery to activate was unheard of, so it was no wonder she was shocked to hear it might have been calculated to activate after a thousand years.

"It would be easy for that woman," Sora stated simply, having known Lina personally.

"I see. The Wise Gods really are on another level..."

"More importantly, was there anything in your transferred memories about magic or sorcery that can restore or transfer lost memories?" Sora asked, pressing close to Celia.

"I'm not sure myself... I don't know if the information in my head is everything, but there's no magic of that kind... I think. As for sorcery, I don't think there's anything regarding that in the memories at all..."

Incidentally, sorcery referred to the act of creating mysterious phenomena through the use of spell formulas. On the other hand, magic referred to the act of planting the sorcery formulas within the body and activating them by chanting a verbal spell. That meant that, strictly speaking, magic was a type of sorcery.

"That phony unwise god..." Sora muttered resentfully at the thought of Lina. It was a statement that clearly showed zero faith and respect for someone normally worshipped as a god.

"Ph-Phony unwise god? That's rather harsh..."

"It's what she gets for being a phony unwise god! She lures people into doing

things for her, but gives them no information! Just what is she thinking?!"

"I-I'm afraid I don't have the answer to that..." Celia winced, recoiling at Sora's indignation. But her point was also reasonable.

Sora's right. She made me reincarnate for a specific purpose, yet she hasn't left me with any information. Why is that? Rio wondered.

There were two possibilities that came to mind. The first was that she couldn't leave him any information. And second was that she could have left him information, but chose not to.

Perhaps there's some kind of restriction to the transfer sorcery? Or is the future liable to change if there's too much information available? Rio theorized to himself.

"Is the information in your head only about magic? Was there nothing else that could provide any directions or clues?" Sora asked Celia.

"There's a formula for a magic I don't know... But come to think of it, I heard someone's voice as well."

Back then, she had definitely heard someone's voice coming from somewhere. Perhaps it had been a message from Lina.

"What? What did the voice say?!"

"Umm. I think it said something like... 'It worked. It's not possible to give you all of it right now, but I'm entrusting everything I couldn't give that person to you.'"

"What does that mean?!"

"I-I don't know!" Celia winced at Sora's hounding.

"All right, calm down now," Rio said, soothing Sora gently.

"But..."

Rio held out his right hand before the unhappy Sora and questioned Celia. "Just to confirm, you're sure Lina said 'It worked'?"

"Yes. I don't know if the owner of the voice was Lina, but that's what I heard."

"From the situation, it seems natural to assume the voice was saying you succeeded in regaining your memories of me—and acquiring that unknown magic... Right?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Does that mean the owner of the voice is watching from somewhere to check whether it worked or not?"

"Perhaps. That's a good point." Celia nodded.

"Th-That's right! As expected of the Dragon King!" Sora beamed, praising

Rio endlessly.

“But that also means the owner of the voice is someone other than Lina.”

Sora gasped in realization. “Oh...”

“How come? If I’m similar to Lina’s disciple, then it seems natural to assume the voice is Lina’s...” Celia tilted her head in confusion.

“Because it’s impossible for it to be Lina’s.”

“Why is that?”

“Just like how the Dragon King reincarnated into me, Lina has also reincarnated into someone else.”

“Huh? Really?!” Celia gasped in shock.

“Yes. The truth is...”

Lina had been reborn as Miharu, according to Aishia. If Lina was still alive right now, that would contradict Aishia’s explanation.

However, Lina had created Aishia from her divinity and transferred her memories into her. It was hard to think she would lie about that.

“Aishia was the one who told me that Lina had reincarnated. But the circumstances surrounding that are a little complicated... Could we leave the details for another time? There’s something else I want to mention first.”

“Of course. What is it?”

“What to do from here on.”

“If there’s anything I can do to help, just say the word,” Celia offered immediately.

“For now, I’d like you to stay with everyone here.”

“Sure, okay... What will you do?” Saddened by the thought of being unable to be with Rio, Celia’s face fell.

“I want to be with everyone again.”

Instead of answering with what he would do, Rio answered with what he wanted. His expression was fleeting like a wilting flower, mirroring Celia’s.

“Rio...”

“But at this rate, the rules of god will get in the way of that. That’s why I have to do something about that first.”

“Is there anything you can do?”

“I have hope now that you remembered me. Whoever gave you your memories back knows how to recover lost memories.”

That meant there was a way to regain the memories.

“Right! The light of that formula that appeared earlier! That formula is the answer!” Sora shouted, pointing a finger at Celia.

“Apparently there’s something that can analyze spell formulas in the new magic spells I acquired. Maybe I can study the formula using that...”

“If you have such a useful spell, you should’ve said something earlier!”

The thought of the Dragon King regaining his memories had Sora jumping excitedly.

“But it can’t be used on living beings. Plus, it can only be used on someone when the formula is activated.”

“In that case, use that spell again!”

“Hmm... There’s a chance the formula is still sealed inside me, but it might have disappeared after it was activated, and it’s not like I was the one who activated it in the first place... I’ll try looking for it, but don’t hope for too much.”

If it was single-use sorcery, the formula would have disappeared with the spell’s activation. Celia chose her words carefully to avoid raising their hopes.

“Th-That’s fine! Just try!” Sora pleaded desperately.

“All right. I’ll look into it once we get back to the Galarc Kingdom.” Celia nodded firmly.

“May I ask the two of you for a favor?” Rio suddenly said. An idea had come to him as he watched the two talk.

“Sure!”

“Of course.”

Sora and Celia’s replies overlapped with each other.

“Can you two head to the Galarc Kingdom together like this? Then, Celia, can you arrange a way for Sora to stay at the mansion at the Galarc Castle?”

“Huh?!”

“I can try, but...”

Sora and Celia were wide-eyed with surprise. The request was beyond what they had been expecting.

“It’ll take too long to explain everything here. Sara and the other girls will be searching for Celia soon,” Rio said, explaining the reason for his request.

Celia looked at Rio sadly. “You won’t come to the Galarc Castle with us?”

“There shouldn’t be an issue if I visit for a short amount of time, but...”

“But...the rules of god?”

“Yes. After becoming a transcendent one, it’s become harder for me to remain in the memories of others.”

“Wait, really?”

“If someone takes their mind off me for some time, they’ll tend to forget

about me. They'd have to stay awake beside me or continuously think about me when we're apart, which isn't realistic. Isn't that right, Sora?" Rio said, turning to Sora, who knew the rules better than him.

"Yes! They'll start to forget the Dragon King the moment they think about something else. If those people outside came in and saw the Dragon King, they wouldn't recognize him as the person who helped them in the city. They'd only remember that someone saved them there."

Any living human had to have moments of downtime, such as bathing or going to sleep. Such moments when the mind relaxed or wandered were enough to trigger that memory loss. If Rio stayed in the same mansion as the others, they'd end up waking the next morning wondering, "Who are you?"

"That's..."

Celia struggled to find her words. The rules were a bigger hindrance to living together than she had imagined.

"That's why I can't go with you," Rio said somewhat sadly, having accepted his reality. He then turned to Sora. "Which is why I'd like you to explain everything I couldn't mention just now. Could you do that for me, Sora?"

"Of course! You can leave that role to Sora, loyal disciple of the Dragon King!"

Sora was delighted to be entrusted with a task by Rio, accepting his request proudly.

"Can Sora live with us without issue?"

"Yes. Apparently she's harder to forget when she isn't seen with me."

Sora was just as easy to forget as Rio when she was together with him, but this wasn't the case when they were apart.

"It's the duty of disciples to appear before others on behalf of the transcendent ones. Most rules that apply to the transcendent one affect their disciples as well, but this one is the exception," Sora said.

"And I trust you'll be able to look after Sora, Celia. She's more knowledgeable than me about the rules, so ask her whatever you wish."

Rio asked Celia to look after Sora once more.

"All right, I got it." Celia accepted with a nod.

Rio bowed his head. "Thank you."

"Say... Can you take off your mask and show me your face properly?" Celia asked, suddenly stepping up close to Rio.

"I forgot I still had it on," Rio said, taking off the broken mask with his right hand. Celia stared up at his face in silence.

“Did you make your hair lighter? Your eye color too. It’s red now,” she said, pointing out all the differences in his outer appearance after becoming a transcendent one. She gazed into his red eyes.

“It’s because—the color changed on its own...” Rio mumbled, struggling to explain.

“Changed on its own? Why...” Celia frowned in concern.

Just then, the door to the cabin they were in opened with a click. Christina, Sara, Orphia, Alma, Vanessa, and Celia’s father Roland came inside.

“This is the only room we haven’t checked...” Vanessa said. She was the first to walk into the room. When the group spotted Rio and the others in the dim storage room, their eyes widened.

“Professor Celia... What are you doing here?” Christina asked, shooting Rio and Sora a searching glance.

“Erm, I found a girl walking around on her own... So I was asking her some questions. She seems to be lost.” Celia made something up on the spot, avoiding eye contact with everyone.

“Sora isn’t some lost child!” Sora argued on reflex, not wanting to be treated like a child.

“...is what she insists, but she seems to have been separated from her master,” Celia explained in a shrill voice.

You’re coming with me, remember? Go along with the story! she protested with a look at Sora.

“Hmph...” Sora pouted. She was discontent, but she seemed to understand.

“Is that so...? If you tell me her family’s name, I can help search for them...”

“Err... About that. It seems she was serving an important foreign figure who was visiting Rodania. Something like a noble, or a wealthy merchant?” Giving the name of a noble from the Restoration was too risky of a lie. Celia quickly came up with something clever on the spot.

“A foreign figure... No wonder I haven’t seen those clothes before.”

“R-Right,” Celia agreed awkwardly.

“And the other person over there is...?” Christina asked.

The group’s gazes shifted to Rio.

“My name is Rio,” Rio said simply, bowing his head.

“You don’t have a family name?”

“I was born a commoner, so I do not. I serve Marquess Rodan’s house.”

“Why are you here...?”

“I was carrying items to this storage room to free up more rooms when this

girl came running in. Followed by the lady," Rio answered, looking from Sora to Celia.

"I see... Have we met somewhere before?" Christina asked all of a sudden. She seemed to be experiencing a strange sense of déjà vu.

"No, it is my first time being in Your Highness's presence..." Rio feigned ignorance, tilting his head.

"I see..." Christina stared intently at Rio's face.

"Come to think of it, were you looking for me for something, Princess Christina?" Celia asked, changing the topic. She wanted to avoid drawing attention to Rio—and her attempt succeeded.

"Yes, I have something to discuss with you."

"Then shall we change locations?"

"Indeed."

"Oh, is it okay if I bring this child along? I've promised to look after her until her master is found," Celia asked, looking at Sora.

"Of course. Let's go."

Christina looked around at everyone's faces. "Okay."

The group turned on their heels and left the room in order of their proximity to the door. Having been in the room from the start, Celia and Sora were naturally the last ones to leave. But before they did, something fell to the floor with a clatter. The source of the sound was the broken mask Rio was wearing mere moments ago. Everyone turned around at the sound.

"Oh, excuse me. You dropped this," Rio said, picking up the fallen mask. He then walked over to Celia and handed it to her.

"Ah, right. Thanks..."

She wasn't sure why Rio was handing her the mask. But she figured he had to have a reason, so she accepted it with a look of surprise and thanked him.

"Take a close look at it later," Rio said shortly. His explanation ended with that.

"Hmm..." Celia examined the mask.

"Professor...?" Christina, who had already left the room, called out to her.

"Oh, right. Coming!" Celia snapped back to her senses and headed for the door.

Rio, meanwhile, saw them off with a bow. Everyone left without a second thought for Rio—other than Sora, who returned his bow with a low bow of her own.

Once Rio was left alone, he quietly exited the room. He made his way

through the ship and out onto the deck, where he jumped off the airship without anyone seeing.

Chapter 3: Sisterly Bonds

One day before the events in Rodania, an enchanted airship was arriving at the Galarc Castle. The ship came from the kingdom of Centostella.

The visit wasn't an unexpected one; Sendo Masato, who was under the care of the Centostella Kingdom, had suddenly been summoned to Galarc as a hero with the First Princess Lilianna Centostella. As allied nations, Galarc had no choice but to contact Centostella. Thus, this was an anticipated visit.

"The enchanted airship from Centostella has arrived."

Notice of the arrival reached Miharu and Satsuki through Charlotte. They went to the entrance of the castle with Masato and Lilianna to greet the visitors. The delegation from Centostella Kingdom soon arrived at the castle's courtyard in horse carriages.

"They're here," Charlotte said when she spotted the first carriage.

Everyone's gazes locked onto the group approaching the castle. The carriages were securely guarded by numerous knights, so whoever was on board was assumedly of ambassador rank or higher.

The carriages eventually came to a stop before them. The knights moved swiftly to open the door of the most securely built carriage first. However...

"They're not coming out...?"

Satsuki tilted her head, puzzled at the prolonged silence. But a few seconds later, a boy and girl hesitantly stepped out of the carriage. The boy was gently pulling the girl by the hand.

"Aki... Takahisa..." Miharu mumbled, eyes widening with a gasp. Beside her, Masato shot Takahisa and Aki a conflicted look and sighed.

"You came," Satsuki said, glancing at Miharu and Masato. She had expected Takahisa and Aki's arrival. After all, Aki was his older stepsister by one year, and Takahisa was his older brother by four. It was only natural for them to be worried.

However, things weren't as simple as that. The relationship between them all was complicated—and it had started with the hero banquet previously held in Galarc. It all started when Takahisa disagreed with the idea of being separated from Miharu and tried to take her to Centostella against her will. Aki had

assisted his reckless behavior—the two of them were too dependent on her.

Luckily, the quick-witted Lilianna prevented Takahisa's abduction attempt with the help of the Galarc Kingdom. But even though the attempt had failed, the two weren't forgiven right away. After some long discussions, it was decided that Takahisa and Aki were forbidden from making contact with Miharu until everyone involved agreed to forgive them. In order to ensure that, Lilianna and Masato took Takahisa and Aki to the Centostella Kingdom and away from Miharu.

That was why Takahisa and Aki were currently in no position to complain if they were asked to leave immediately. Just what were they thinking coming all the way to Galarc and showing themselves to Miharu? An explanation was direly needed.

"Step back, Miharu," Satsuki said, standing before Miharu to protect her.

Lilianna walked forward. "The two of you were forbidden from making contact with Lady Miharu without Sir Masato's and my permission, I believe."

This statement was a test from Lilianna to Takahisa. If Takahisa were to reply with anything along the lines of, "But the two of you both disappeared," she would promptly tell them to leave. Thus, Lilianna stared at them with narrowed eyes, awaiting their reply.

"I'm sorry!" Takahisa eventually apologized, bowing his head. "I wanted to apologize properly to Miharu, and to everyone else... I went to the king for permission to board the ship instead. I can't believe what I did to you all... There was something wrong with me back then. I just truly, truly wanted to apologize. I did something so awful to you..."

Takahisa seemed to have reflected on his actions, as he accepted all the blame with clear shame in his voice.

"I'm sorry...!"

With his head still bowed, he repeated his apology. Incidentally, the king had allowed him to come on the condition he would follow whatever orders Lilianna gave him upon their arrival.

"I want to apologize too. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Miharu." Aki similarly bowed her head while she apologized repeatedly and cried, her tears falling to the ground.

"We're not expecting you to forgive us like this... But we wanted to give a proper apology for everything. That's all, honestly... Let's go, Aki."

Takahisa patted Aki on the back, gently directing her to return to the carriage. They had made their apologies and were now voluntarily making their leave. In

a way, that was admirable, but—

“H-Hold on a minute. You can’t just appear out of nowhere, say what you want, then leave again...” Satsuki called out, stopping them from boarding the carriage. She looked to Miharu and Lilianna for their reactions. Miharu had been the actual victim, and Lilianna had also gone through a lot of trouble for their sakes.

Besides, they had previously agreed on spending some time apart for the two of them to reflect. The incident had happened several months ago, so they had indeed spent time apart. They had also said their apologies. Wouldn’t it be better to talk a little more to see how sincere they were?

“I will leave the decision to the three of you—including Sir Masato,” Lilianna said, clearly expressing her stance on the subject.

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“I see. What do you think, Masato?”

“Miharu was the one who went through the most trouble. Princess Lilianna too. If they agree with each other, then I won’t object to their decision. Though it all depends on the attitudes of these two.”

“Miharu... What do you want to do? I want to respect your decision. I also think the final call on whether they should be forgiven or not is up to you. We’ll make them leave if you want them to leave, or we can let them stay if you want to talk to them. I’ll always be on your side, of course,” Satsuki said, expressing her full support of whatever Miharu decided.

“Satsuki...” Miharu bowed her head at Satsuki gratefully, then looked at Aki.

She had known Aki her whole life. Aki was the little sister of her beloved childhood friend, and someone she treated like her own little sister. Aki also adored Miharu as an older sister, and they had grown up beside each other in Japan. That’s why Miharu considered Aki her own family.

But whether or not she forgave Aki because she was family aside, it wasn’t easy to cut a family member out of her life. She didn’t even want to consider it as an option. If a complete stranger had done it, it would have been unforgivable, but their relationship would continue forever. And Takahisa was Aki’s stepbrother—she couldn’t cut contact with one without doing so with the other.

“I... I want to talk to Aki. I don’t know whether I want to forgive Takahisa yet, but...Aki is my precious little sister.”

Was Aki doing well? What had she been up to while they were apart? In a corner of her heart, she had always been worried about her. That’s why Miharu spoke frankly about her own feelings. When Aki heard her words, she started crying even harder.

“I see... Of course, that makes sense. I agree completely,” Satsuki said, nodding along to Miharu’s opinion. She then turned to Lilianna and Charlotte. “And so, we’d like to talk to them a little,” she said.

“In that case, how about we head to the mansion? I will have rooms for them prepared in the guesthouse where Gouki and his company are staying.”

That way, on the off chance Takahisa tried to pull anything, they would have backup on hand, Charlotte hinted implicitly.

“Right... Let’s do that. Does that sound okay with you, Miharu?”

“Yes.” Miharu nodded firmly.

“What about you, Princess Lilianna? Everyone in the delegation is about to have an audience with my father...” Charlotte was about to split up from Satsuki and the rest of their group as their guide. The original plan was to have Lilianna

go with her.

“I will attend the meeting as planned,” Lilianna said, prioritizing meeting the king.

“Understood. In that case, we will go our separate ways here. Can we entrust these two to the rest of you?”

“Of course.” Satsuki nodded.

Seeing that, Charlotte began to show the delegation the way inside the castle. “Then if Princess Lilianna and the delegation could follow me...”

“Please take care of the rest,” Lilianna said before following Charlotte.

Thus, Miharu, Satsuki, Masato, Aki, and Takahisa were left behind. Technically speaking, they were also accompanied by the female knights who were to escort them back to the mansion too.

“Shall we get going?” Satsuki suggested. She believed she had to take the lead as the eldest. With a look at Aki and Masato, she encouraged them to start moving towards the mansion. But Aki was still sobbing loudly—

“...” Takahisa was frozen with an awkward look on his face.

“Hello? Are you listening, Takahisa?” Satsuki called out with a light sigh.

“Y-Yes...” Takahisa winced. “Err. Is it really okay for me to go too?” he asked hesitantly.

“Were you not listening to what Miharu just said?”

“No—I mean, I was, but...”

“You’re Aki’s older brother. You’re getting another chance for the sake of your siblings. This isn’t forgiveness. This is probation. If you weren’t their brother, you would have been kicked out without question, so you better be grateful to them.”

Satsuki made sure to emphasize exactly how serious his actions were.

“Right... Thank you, Aki. Masato too. And I’m sorry.” Takahisa bowed his head at Aki, who was still crying, then Masato, who was standing beside Miharu.

“Has your personality changed in the time we’ve been apart...?” Masato asked skeptically. He recalled what Takahisa had been like before he had been summoned to Galarc as a hero.

Takahisa and Masato had been in constant conflict with each other. Masato took every chance to criticize Takahisa for what he did, which Takahisa found extremely disagreeable. Takahisa had basically shut himself in his room and refused to see anyone other than Aki.

That’s why seeing Takahisa here apologizing so earnestly wasn’t just an

unexpected sight—it was eerie. Just what had happened for this change of heart? Had his personality really been replaced with someone else's? He wouldn't doubt it at this point.

"I know what you mean. I found it strange myself. But when I heard that you and Lily had suddenly disappeared from the castle, I was really worried. I was in such a panic... I asked myself what I had been doing until now..." Takahisa said with a self-deprecating smile. His guilt seemed so genuine, he would make one extremely talented actor if this was a lie.

"I'm glad to hear you were worried when we disappeared. But you've currently lost all my trust. That's why I don't want to hear your apology, but to see it in your attitude. Otherwise I'll never be able to trust you again."

Unsure of how to react to Takahisa's dramatic change of heart, Masato chose to end their conversation with a cold warning.

"That's fine," Takahisa said with a nod.

He's kind of returned to being the brother I knew in Japan, Masato thought, observing his older brother. If the brother that had tried to kidnap Miharu to Centostella and quarrel with him every day was the dark Takahisa, then the brother before him right now was the light Takahisa.

Instead of seeing it as a change in personality, it was almost like Takahisa had time traveled to a point before he had come to this world. Masato had almost forgotten what his brother had been like on Earth, thanks to their constant fighting as of late.

"At any rate, we'll kick you out immediately if you try to pull anything funny. If you don't have anything else to say, we're going to go now."

Satsuki was similarly thrown off-kilter by Takahisa's lack of sulking. But a change of heart didn't mean automatic forgiveness. What Takahisa had done was so terrible, she refused to give up her blunt attitude towards him.

"Yes, of course. I'm truly sorry for everything," Takahisa repeated, bowing once again.

"Is that sorry directed to me?" Satsuki asked, looking at Miharu. She felt like Takahisa had yet to look at Miharu even once—and her impression was correct.

"No... I'm sorry, Miharu."

Takahisa finally found the resolution to face Miharu and lowered his head.

"...Okay."

"I'm truly, truly sorry..."

"That's enough apologizing. Just don't do anything that would make Aki sad again. Masato either."

Having known her since birth and treated her like a real little sister, Miharu wanted to continue her relationship with Aki. And as long as Aki considered Takahisa her beloved older brother, then Miharu had to keep in contact with him as well. That's why Miharu didn't want to hear his apology through words, but through his actions towards Aki and Masato as an older brother.

"Yeah, I got it." Takahisa seemed to feel too guilty to make eye contact with Miharu any longer. He nodded while hanging his head. Then, Miharu approached Aki, who had been crying with her head down the entire time.

"Aki," she called gently. It had been several months since she called her name like this.

"..." Aki flinched.

"Will you raise your head?" Miharu asked.

Aki sobbed, keeping her head down in silence.

"Why don't we have a chat?"

"...I..."

"Yes?" Miharu gently encouraged her to continue, as though she were soothing a small child.

"I don't have the right..."

"The right?" Miharu wondered.

"I... I did something horrible to you. I'm not allowed to be treated kindly by you. I don't have the right to talk to you again..."

"I don't hate you, Aki. I want to be friends again," Miharu said slowly and clearly, conveying her feelings to Aki. "Because I'm your older sister." Sure enough, her feelings seemed to reach Aki.

"Miharu..." More tears spilled from Aki's swollen eyes.

"Do you still consider me your older sister, Aki?"

"I-I do... I do, b-but..."

Aki trembled from head to toe. She didn't know how to approach this reconciliation with Miharu. She felt so guilty, she couldn't look at Miharu out of shame. That's why she was holding her ground even though she wanted nothing more than to hug Miharu and cry.

"I'm sorry." Miharu wrapped her arms around Aki and patted her back.

"Why are you the one apologizing?" Aki asked, tears streaming down her face.

"I think we just had a normal sibling quarrel. That's why there has to be a way for us to make up. Let's talk about what went wrong and what we should have done instead. I have lots of regrets about my choices as well. If you have

any that you can think of, I'd like to hear them as well."

Even if they weren't related by blood, Miharu accepted Aki as her little sister. That was the painful truth.

"Waaah! I'm...I'm so sorry, M-Miharu!!!" Like a burst dam, Aki started wailing at the top of her lungs.

"I know." Miharu nodded, accepting the crying Aki.

"I don't really want to be the one to say this, but this is all your doing, Takahisa. You were the one who dragged Aki into this," Satsuki pointed out harshly.

"...Right." Takahisa hung his head with a bitter expression.

Miharu continued embracing the wailing Aki for several more minutes. The group only set off for the mansion after she had stopped crying.

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With Miharu leading Aki by the hand, the group made their way to the mansion.

It was Takahisa and Aki's first time visiting the mansion. Strangers were normally forbidden from entering the mansion, the only exception being if they were accompanied by one of the residents there. They greeted the female knights guarding the mansion and went inside.

"Ah. Welcome...back? Oh! Aki!"

The first person to notice their return was Latifa. She appeared in the entrance hall after detecting their return. She hesitated for a brief moment when she saw Takahisa, whom she had never met before, but she brightened up immediately when she spotted Aki holding hands with Miharu.

"Ah..." There was still a guilty look on Aki's face. She timidly opened and closed her mouth, struggling for words. However...

"It's Aki!" Latifa ran right up to Aki and hugged her.

"L-Latifa..." Aki mumbled, on the verge of crying.

"Ah... Here, I'm called Suzune. So please keep quiet about my real name! Shh," Latifa whispered in Aki's ear, realizing it'd be problematic if she called her Latifa in front of other people.

Latifa had a past in the Strahl region as a slave trained for assassination. She couldn't risk her former master, Duke Huguenot, catching wind of her name and recognizing it, so she went by the name Suzune now.

Thankfully, everyone present other than Takahisa was aware of her circumstances. They hadn't informed Charlotte and Lilianna of it, and the

knights that guarded the mansion naturally didn't know anything either. Aki had only uttered Latifa's name quietly, so it was uncertain whether Takahisa had even heard it. As long as she called her Suzune from here on, there shouldn't be a problem.

"Huh...?" Aki blinked in surprise at the unexpected request.

"Okay? It's Suzune. Suzune," Latifa emphasized while whispering.

"O-Okay. Suzune..." Aki called in confusion.

"What are you two whispering about?" Satsuki asked with a smile.

"He he. It's a secret! Right?" Latifa answered, hugging Aki tighter.

"Yeah..."

Tears welled in Aki's eyes once again, and she hung her head and nodded. To Aki, Latifa—as well as Sara's little sister, Hera—was her closest friend of the same age that she'd made in this world. And that friend wasn't treating her any differently.

There was no way Latifa wasn't aware of what she had done, yet she was choosing to remain her friend. That's why, in spite of her guilt, she felt happy as well.

"How have you been?" Latifa asked caringly, peering into Aki's face.

"Good..."

"You went away without saying a proper goodbye, so I was worried."

"I'm sorry... I'm sorry, Latifa."

"There's nothing to apologize for."

Latifa moved to stand beside Aki and gently rubbed her back.

"Oh, do we have guests?"

Just then, Gouki arrived at the entrance hall with his wife Kayoko and daughter Komomo. Their servants, Sayo and Aoi, followed behind them.

"These are friends of ours, Gouki. This is Masato's older sister, Sendo Aki, and his older brother, Sendo Takahisa." Satsuki introduced the Sendo siblings to Gouki and his family.

"Oh?" Gouki hummed with curiosity, staring first at Aki, then Takahisa. "Allow me to introduce everyone. I am Saga Gouki, and this is my wife Kayoko and daughter Komomo. These are our servants, Aoi and Sayo."

The people he named bowed as they were introduced.

"Saga Gouki... Are you Japanese?" Takahisa asked with surprise. With their appearances they could pass off as Japanese people, so he was probably shocked that so many people had wandered into this world like them.

"Ha ha! Lady Satsuki asked us the same thing. But we are not. We are

immigrants from a land called the Yagumo region.” With a hearty laugh, Gouki cleared Takahisa’s misunderstanding.

“They’re close friends of a friend of ours. After we met each of them, we all started living together. The whole family’s really strong—they’re like samurai from Japan. Masato and I are training under them.”

“I-I see...”

“Position-wise, I’d be considered a guest military general. My family and our servants are staying here while serving as guards of this mansion. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“R-Right. Nice to meet you too.”

Takahisa returned Gouki’s bow in a fluster. The age gap between them was enough for Gouki to be his father, yet he was bowing to him respectfully.

“If this is a reunion between friends, then we should make our leave. Feel free to call us if you need anything.”

It seemed they had only come to introduce themselves. Once Gouki finished his greetings, they promptly turned to leave again. However...

“U-Umm...”

Gouki stopped and turned around. “Is something the matter?”

“Miharu and Aki are about to have a private conversation, and I was hoping to talk to you and Kayoko alone...” Satsuki said, looking at Masato and Takahisa. If they grouped off like this, the two would be left by themselves—and they had been bickering with each other not too long ago. It was clear they’d awkwardly struggle for words if left to their own devices.

“I see... In that case, Aoi can show Sir Masato and Sir Takahisa the way. Komomo and Sayo, you two can go too.”

Gouki sensed that Satsuki didn’t want to leave the two alone. He didn’t have so much life experience for nothing—he was able to read the room and give orders to Komomo and his servants.

“Of course, father!” Komomo replied energetically. Aoi and Sayo nodded with a bow.

“Suzune too. I’ll be there right after I’m done talking to Gouki and Kayoko. Look after Masato and Takahisa for me.”

“Sure, leave it to me,” Latifa agreed happily.

“Thanks, everyone,” Miharu said, looking at the girls.

Out of the residents of the mansion, Komomo was the youngest along with Masato, but she shook her head briskly with a friendly smile. “No worries.”

“Aki and Masato are both my friends. Let’s talk a lot later, Aki!” Latifa said,

hugging Aki tightly once more.

“Yeah...”

Aki agreed with a bashful smile. Thus, the group temporarily broke up to hold their respective discussions.

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Sendo Takahisa and Sendo Masato moved to the dining room of the mansion with Latifa, Komomo, Aoi, and Sayo.

“I’ll go and prepare tea and snacks,” Sayo immediately offered, heading for the kitchen.

“Go on, please take a seat,” Latifa said, encouraging Takahisa to sit down. The others were all residents of the castle, so Takahisa was the only guest there. Perhaps it was because he was surrounded by girls he had never met before, but —

“Sure... Excuse me.”

Takahisa seemed rather nervous as he sat down in a chair.

“Let’s sit down too,” Latifa prompted, and the rest of them sat at the dining table. Then...

“We still haven’t introduced ourselves properly, so I’ll go first. I’m Suzune, a friend of Masato’s. It’s nice to meet you.”

Latifa led the conversation and introduced herself to Takahisa. She was normally shy around strangers, but her awareness of her status as an elder to Komomo and Masato and the familiar faces around her helped her find her courage.

“I’m sure you know after watching them earlier, but she’s also a friend of Aki’s. When we first wandered into this world and were at a loss for where to go, she was one of the people who helped us out.”

With a light sigh, Masato joined the conversation. He would have either cursed out loud or held his silence for much longer if he was alone with Takahisa, but he was able to talk like his usual self thanks to Latifa’s presence.

Thanks, Latifa.

He shot a look of gratitude over to Latifa. Latifa tilted her head with a smile as though to say, “for what?”

“And this is Saga Komomo, and her attendant Aoi. Sayo, who went to the kitchen just now, is an apprentice attendant for the Saga family.”

“I’m Komomo. On behalf of Aoi and Sayo as well, it is a pleasure to meet you, Sir Takahisa.”

After being introduced by Latifa, Komomo straightened herself and bowed politely. Aoi had no intention of stepping forward as a mere attendant, so she simply bowed deeply in silence.

“I’m Sendo Takahisa, Masato and Aki’s older brother... It’s nice to meet you.”

Takahisa stood up from his seat and returned the bow hesitantly. He looked around at everyone’s faces with a curious look, seemingly bothered by something.

“Okay, that’s the introductions done. You look like you want to ask something. Is something the matter?” Latifa asked.

“Ah, no, it’s just... Everyone has Japanese names—names that sound similar to the ones from where we came from. I just found that strange. The black hair also makes everyone seem like Japanese people... You really aren’t Japanese, right?” Takahisa asked in return, explaining his confusion.

“Oh, I see.”

Latifa and Komomo, who were sitting beside each other, exchanged a look of understanding.

“We are most definitely born and raised in this world. The Yagumo region is just a long distance away from Strahl,” Komomo said, regarding her birthplace.

“The Yagumo region, huh? Even the place name sounds Japanese... Right, Masato?” Takahisa said, awkwardly inviting Masato to speak.

“I guess...” Masato muttered.

“I mean, we were summoned to this world, so maybe there’s something that connects our old world to this world?”

“Maybe. We’ve discussed that with Satsuki and Miharu before, but we concluded there was no way of finding out for sure. It could also just be a coincidence.”

While their names and facial features resembled those of Japanese people, the writing system used in the Yagumo region was different, and the words they used weren’t from Earth either. The last time they discussed this, they agreed there was more than enough possibility it was all just a coincidence.

“It would’ve been nice if there was some kind of clue to getting back to Earth...” Takahisa muttered. He seemed to have some lingering attachments to his former world.

“You’ve come to a faraway world that you’ve never heard of before. It’s only normal for you to miss your own world. We also came here from a distant land, so I understand how you feel,” Komomo said clearly, empathizing with

Takahisa.

“You said the Yagumo region was far away, right? Is it too far to visit from Strahl?”

“Yes, we had to journey through uncharted lands to get here. It’s called the Wilderness. There’s no civilization out there, and the environment is too harsh for people to live normally. Even for a veteran soldier, journeying on foot would take years.”

The Wilderness was overrun with dangerous creatures, and the terrain was difficult to traverse. It was covered in abnormal weather all year long, so most humans couldn’t travel through it.

“Wow... I’ve heard that sea routes haven’t been developed due to dangerous sea creatures, but what about the sky? Wouldn’t it be easy to fly over it in enchanted airships?” Takahisa asked.

“The Galarc Kingdom used to have contact with the Yagumo region, but apparently it was impractical to travel there by airship,” Masato answered. “Something about the creatures in the sky being dangerous as well, and not having enough enchanted gems as fuel.”

The reason why they couldn’t refill on enchanted gems was because there were practically no monsters in the Wilderness to obtain them from. It was possible to have humans supply their magic essence as fuel, but the entire crew would have to be made of sorcerers in order to secure enough essence for the trip.

“The Yagumo region doesn’t even have magic artifacts, so things like the enchanted airships don’t exist. And like Sir Masato said, the skies are filled with danger. Demi-dragons reside in the Wilderness, and there are plenty of other dangerous creatures that can fly,” Komomo added.

In order to travel through the Wilderness, one had to have either the strength to deal with the dangers, or the mobility to run and hide from them as soon as they were detected. In that regard, enchanted airships were big and slow targets moving through the open sky. If fast and ferocious dragons suddenly appeared in the sky on Earth, no one would want to fly over the affected area in aircraft that had limited flexibility in takeoff and landing. In fact, they would probably call it a no-fly zone—which was essentially what it was here.

If it was through a smaller means of flying, such as a caster using spirit arts or a knight on a griffin, then the journey would be less risky. But either way, there was no way to truly understand the Wilderness’s dangers unless one experienced it in person.

“And you made it through that dangerous journey at such a young age, Komomo?” Takahisa said in an impressed tone.

“In my nation, some girls marry at the age of ten. As a daughter of a military family, I’ve been trained by my father from a young age, so it was nothing to me,” Komomo said with a cool expression.

“That’s right, Komomo’s strong. When I fought her without physical body enhancements, I lost straight away...”

Masato had continued his sword training after coming to the Galarc Castle. Gouki was the one training him, and he had sparred with Komomo numerous times. Losing to a girl his age must have been a shock, as he retold the tale with slumped shoulders.

Takahisa’s eyes widened in surprise. “You lost, Masato?”

His shock was also because of how small Komomo was for her age. It was hard to believe someone of such a small frame could win over Masato.

“You should try sparring with her too, bro. You won’t win either. Probably,” Masato said with a smirk.

“I’d be happy to take on any challengers.” Komomo nodded with a determined smile. This competitive spirit of hers was most likely inherited from Gouki, a result of being raised in a military family.

“Aha ha, if the chance arises.” Takahisa laughed off the offer, seeing it as no more than children playing with each other. He probably didn’t see the possibility of himself losing, and he didn’t want to injure a child either.

Just then, Sayo returned with tea and snacks. “Here you go.”

“Thank you, Sayo,” Takahisa said.

“You remember my name...”

“I’m great at remembering the names and faces of girls. Besides, you’re cute.”

“...Thanks,” Sayo said with a stiff smile, bowing politely.

“Come have a seat as well, Sayo!” Latifa patted the seat beside her.

“Okay.” Sayo nodded happily and sat in the seat next to Latifa.

“So what were we saying... Oh, right, the Yagumo region. Do you get homesick when you’re so far away from home?” Takahisa asked, looking at Komomo and the others from the Yagumo region.

“My brother stayed back in Yagumo, so I do miss him sometimes. But I’ve made new friends with everyone here, and it’s not like we’ll never see each other again,” Komomo answered with a calm grin.

“I see... You’re really strong for someone so little, Komomo. You’re almost

like an adult."

Takahisa seemed to see something similar in her circumstances to his, as he had another self-deprecating smile on his face.

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A short while ago, Miharu had brought Aki to her bedroom. She sat Aki down on her bed before sitting down beside her.

"Aki..."

"..." Aki was clearly nervous, her face tense at her thoughts. Miharu called out to her gently.

"I'm sure your head is a blank slate right now, so you don't have to force yourself to talk. I'll wait for you to calm down and organize your thoughts. Until then, we can stay like this," she said, rubbing Aki's back gently. However...

"No... I'll talk now. I want to talk now."

Aki shook her head with resolution. She was filled with the urge to let Miharu spoil her with her endless kindness, but she couldn't follow that urge. If she did, she would end up drowning in it—that was the feeling she got.

"Okay, then I'll listen." Miharu stopped touching Aki's back and placed her hands on her thighs.

"I... I don't want to betray everyone's trust anymore. I never want to do anything to betray you again, Miharu. I did something unforgivable, yet everyone looked at me with kind eyes... I want to be able to look them in the eye in return," Aki said, confessing the feelings in her heart.

"I see..." Miharu replied. "But you know, Aki. I don't feel that you betrayed me," she added.

"That's... I definitely betrayed you—your trust. I knew you didn't want to go, but I helped you get taken away against your will," Aki admitted.

"Yeah, it was against my will. But I believe that was because we lacked communication. We each wanted the other to do something without saying what that was. We were too hopeful that the other would know without using words. When we realized we couldn't live up to the other's expectations, we avoided talking about it. At least, that was the case for me. I failed to tell you how I felt."

Miharu also admitted her own fault in words. Then, after a slight pause... "I'm not interested in Takahisa in a romantic sense. That's why, depending on your decision, we can't all be together," she said to Aki clearly.

"Okay..." Aki let out a pained voice, but nodded firmly.

"Sorry. I was faintly aware that you were trying to get us together. I knew

that was your hope for the relationship between us. But I pretended not to notice. I didn't try to reject it. I didn't want to disappoint you."

"It's fine... I knew deep down as well. You've got someone else you like."

"Huh...?" Miharu stared at her blankly.

"You don't have to hide it. You still love him, don't you? Amakawa Haruto," Aki said.

It was strange. Hearing the name was enough for her to feel strong abhorrence, yet she felt nothing when she said the name herself.

"..."

Meanwhile, Miharu was shaken and struggled for what to say. She felt something strange too.

It was true that she had always loved Amakawa Haruto. He was her first love whom she had made a very important promise with. She grew up treasuring those childhood memories, and they were still as vivid as ever to her. So...why?

Why did it feel like something essential was missing? Was there someone she loved other than her childhood friend, Amakawa Haruto...? The moment she considered that thought, it was like a haze filled her mind.

"What's wrong, Miharu?" Aki peered into her face. With that, the blurry figure in Miharu's mind dispersed back into the void.

"Ah... Yeah. You're right. I still like Haru-kun even now." Miharu snapped back to her senses and spoke slowly, as though she was convincing herself.

"I hated him so much... But it seems like I don't hate him anymore," Aki muttered in revelation.

"Did something make you have a change of heart?"

"When mom got divorced, he was seven and I was four... I actually knew all along that it wasn't his fault. There was nothing he could have done about it. But until recently, I couldn't accept that... I hated him because I thought it was so unfair. I've finally realized that now," Aki explained eloquently.

"I see... I actually noticed when you started hating Haru. That's why, to avoid hurting you, I stopped mentioning him... But I should have told you that I still loved him the entire time," Miharu said with a look of deep regret.

"No, it's not your fault... Even if you told me, my past self would have refused to listen. You brought him up a few times, didn't you? But when I got super angry in reaction, you read the room and stopped..." Aki said. "I took advantage of that kindness of yours, and tried to make you get together with Takahisa. That way, I would have an older sister and older brother. I tried to force my ideal onto you," she continued, analyzing her own actions.

“You were separated against your will at four years old. It must have been hard. I know just how much you used to love Haru-kun,” Miharu said, gently making a reference to Aki’s painful circumstances.

“I tried to use my new older brother to replace him. That’s why I wanted you to fit in your previous position beside him. But that was... That was rude to both you and my new brother.” Aki condemned herself with a bitter expression.

“I’ll be honest with you... I actually had that thought. That you were trying to replace Haru-kun with Takahisa.”

“Right... Of course.” Aki trembled in reaction to Miharu’s words.

“No, I was wrong. I quickly realized that you weren’t trying to do that.” Miharu shook her head, correcting Aki’s misunderstanding.

“What do you mean...?” Aki asked nervously.

“Because I realized you truly loved Takahisa.”

“...”

“Perhaps Haru-kun’s presence had an influence on that. But even without Haru-kun, I think you truly love Takahisa now. You don’t just adore him as a replacement for Haru-kun, you see him as your real brother. I’ve grown up by your side, so I can tell.”

“Mmn...” When Miharu pointed that out, Aki’s face crumpled. She couldn’t hold back the tears threatening to spill from her eyes.

“But there’s one thing I’m mad about.”

“What...?”

“Even if I don’t get together with Takahisa, I’m still your older sister. At least, that’s what I believe. We’re not related by blood, but I consider you my real little sister. I didn’t want to ask this, but—is that not the same for you? Do you not consider me your older sister?” Miharu asked with a faint hint of anger.

“Th-That’s— That’s not— I never—! I’m sorry! I’m so sorry, Miharu!” Aki sobbed hysterically as she clung to Miharu.

“I’m sorry for asking that out of the blue.” Miharu hugged Aki tightly. Aki had probably just wanted the security. She lost her happy family when she was only four years old. She learned just how quickly it took for a warm family to disappear, so she wanted a visibly evident bond—that was why she’d wanted Miharu and Takahisa to get together.

“Haru-kun and Takahisa are unrelated to this matter. I will always be your older sister. It’s the duty of an older sister to listen to her little sister’s selfish requests, so I won’t hate you over this. You can still act spoiled in front of me.”

“Okay... Thank you, Miharu. Thank you, and sorry. I’m sorry...!” Aki wailed,

desperately burying her face in Miharu's chest and crying at the top of her lungs.

"It's okay. Thank you as well, Aki," Miharu said, continuing to hug Aki lovingly. For the next few minutes, Aki cried in Miharu's arms until she fell asleep like an exhausted child. Miharu lay her down on the bed and returned to Satsuki.

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◇ ◇ ◇

Meanwhile, in another room of the mansion, Satsuki had just finished giving Gouki and Kayoko an explanation. The topic was, of course, their relationship with Takahisa and Aki. Now that Takahisa and Aki had come to the mansion, she believed it'd be better to share the situation with them.

"And that's why I'd appreciate it if you could keep an eye on things," Satsuki said, concluding with a bow.

"Understood. If that's the case, then we'll happily assist wherever we can. If you need someone to take on more meddling or troublesome duties, just say the word," Gouki replied with a cheerful nod.

"Thank you very much. But I can't ask you to go that far..."

"We're freeloaders, after all. Don't hesitate to work us to the bone. Isn't that right, Kayoko?"

"Indeed so."

The Saga couple offered their assistance good-naturedly.

"You're not freeloaders! You're all family to us."

"It's an honor to hear you say that. But if you truly believe that, then there's even less reason for you to hold back."

"Gouki, Kayoko... Oh? Who is it?" Satsuki called out, as there was suddenly a knock at the door

"It's me."

"Miharu? Come on in."

With a clack of the door opening, Miharu entered the room. "Satsuki. Hello Gouki, and Kayoko too..."

"I just finished explaining the situation to them. How did things go on your end?" Satsuki asked, watching Miharu's face.

"It's okay. We shared our feelings with each other. I don't think she's had any sleep recently, so I've just put her to bed. She seemed tired."

"I see..." Satsuki let out a breath of relief at Miharu's peaceful expression.

"That's why I was hoping to let Aki stay the night here if possible."

"Sure. But Takahisa will have to leave the mansion."

"Thank you."

"I'm trusting you to handle things with Aki. But Takahisa can at least have dinner with us before he leaves. I wanted to talk to him too."

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That night, a humble banquet was held at their mansion. The attendees were the residents of the mansion, Masato and Lilianna, and the newly arrived Aki and Takahisa. With Miharu, Aki, Satsuki, Masato, and Takahisa present, everyone from Japan had gathered for a long-awaited reunion meal.

Time passed by amicably. No one brought up any dark topics, and it was almost as though they had returned to their previous relationships on Earth.

"It's been a long time since I've had so much fun," Takahisa muttered happily. However, fun times were fated to end in the blink of an eye. With the meal over and some pleasant conversation exchanged...

"Now, let's call it a night," Satsuki interrupted.

"..." At that moment, Takahisa stiffened. The sky was already dark outside. All that was left to do for the day was bathe and sleep. He wondered what would happen from here. Perhaps he would be allowed to stay over here? It would be a lie to say he wasn't hopeful.

"Aki will be staying the night here, but Takahisa has his own guest room in the castle, so he'll be staying there."

Satsuki didn't allow him to have any false hope. The first words she said after dinner ended were to address the issue of his accommodations.

"Huh...? Oh, okay..."

With his hopes dashed, a sudden sense of loss filled Takahisa.

"I arranged the room myself. It's one of the best guest rooms in our castle, so I hope you find it comfortable to stay in, Sir Takahisa. Hee hee," Charlotte said to Takahisa with a grin. She seemed to be enjoying his disappointed reaction.

Gosh, Char. That's nasty.

Satsuki had known her long enough to have a vague idea of what she was thinking. She shot Charlotte an unimpressed look.

It's just so amusing, I can't help it. You should keep raking him over the coals this much. Charlotte continued grinning as though to say just that. However, Satsuki didn't feel any sympathy for Takahisa either.

"Sorry. This mansion is meant to be for girls only," she said with a small sigh.

"Huh? But Masato's staying here...right? And Gouki too..." Takahisa was taken aback.

"That would be because of the difference in trust." Satsuki implicitly reminded him to consider what he had done did to Miharu.

"Ah... Right, of course," Takahisa muttered weakly. He'd had so much fun since coming to the mansion, he'd forgotten that he wasn't trusted. The truth was

thrust in his face once again, reminding him that things still weren't the way they used to be. That had to be a shock to him.

"I have things to discuss with the delegation, so I will be in the guesthouse as well tonight. I can accompany you back to your room," Lilianna said, informing Takahisa of her intent to head to the guesthouse as well. As the First Princess of the Centostella Kingdom, she probably wanted to use this opportunity to talk to him alone as well.

"Lily... Okay."

Takahisa nodded dejectedly, leaving the mansion with Lilianna in low spirits.

Interlude: The Heroes' Resolution

One hour after Takahisa and Lilianna left the mansion, Takahisa was sitting on his bed alone in his guest room.

On the walk here, Lily asked me what happened. Of course she would—I was incredibly depressed until recently.

In the dark room with no lights on, Takahisa sneered at himself. He had self-awareness of how unwell his mental state had been. However...

I don't get it. Why was I so panicked into acting like that?

Takahisa himself was unable to figure out why he had done such a thing. He'd wanted to be with Miharu, but Miharu herself had declined that, saying it was impossible—which caused him to panic and attempt to take her to Centostella by force.

I love Miharu, but...

When he reflected upon his actions, even he found himself too high-handed. What was he going to do if he succeeded? It was clear he hadn't even considered that. Just what was he thinking back then?

I guess that's just how unstable my mind was back then.

After wandering into this world all alone, without his family or friends—or Miharu, the object of his desires—he was forced into the role of a hero. Then, when he finally reunited with Miharu and the others, he was told they were unable to stay together...

Mentally backed into a corner, there was no room in his heart to accept reality. That's how the current Takahisa analyzed himself.

But there was a vital factor missing from his analysis.

That factor was Rio, whom he had forgotten due to the rules of god. The greatest reason why Takahisa had been so desperate was because he had learned that Miharu had feelings for Rio.

I loved Miharu first. Before we wandered into this world, I was the one who was always beside her. That's right—the man Miharu's most intimate with is me. Yet this guy who came out of nowhere—this criminal who's killed people before—is standing beside Miharu as though he's some good guy. On top of that, Miharu actually wants to be with him. She was obviously tricked by him in the

time we spent apart.

I have to be the one to protect Miharu.

Regardless of his justification, Takahisa had acted on his impending sense of danger when he realized his relationship with Miharu was about to be taken from him. He'd clung to the fact that he knew Miharu and had been in love with her for longer as a reason to frantically search for Rio's faults.

However, due to the rules of god activating upon Rio's recent transformation into a transcendent one, Takahisa had lost his memories of him.

Maybe I wasn't as mentally strong as I thought. Anyone would have rejected a forceful invitation like that... There's no way I would have done such a thing if I were thinking straight. Argh!

What was he thinking, doing such a thing to his beloved Miharu? Takahisa writhed in agonizing self-hatred. He honestly couldn't understand why he did such a thing.

He believed he wasn't the type of person to do such a thing. He honestly believed he was a person of good values. Indeed, putting aside the events stemming from Rio's involvement with Miharu, Takahisa was a righteous person with high ethical standards.

That was why he was unable to understand his past actions, now that he had forgotten about Rio. He felt truly repentant and regretful over everything.

He couldn't imagine himself in a situation where he would discard his ethics in order to obtain Miharu. If he had been thinking logically, he would have realized that such a thing would only worsen his relationship with her.

In reality, the current relationship between Takahisa and Miharu had hit rock bottom. No, it was almost at rock bottom—he had received a chance to redeem himself, after all.

Brooding about things won't help. I'll have to regain her trust through my actions from here on. Because at the end of the day, I still love her...

He wanted to be beside her once more. He wanted to be with her as long as he could. He was in love with Miharu, so he couldn't give up on her.

It's not over yet. This is a new beginning. I want to be the one to protect Miharu.

He couldn't afford to make mistakes anymore. He would never do such a thing again. With a mix of determination and excitement in his heart, Takahisa was unable to sleep that night.

◇ ◇ ◇

The next morning, Rodania, the capital of Marquess Rodan's territory and the headquarters of the Restoration, had been occupied by the Beltrum Kingdom's army.

Thanks to Rio's quiet struggles, a number of enchanted airships had safely escaped from Rodania, including one with Christina on board. In the middle of that Restoration airship's journey to the Galarc Kingdom for refuge...

"Huh...?" The hero, Sakata Hiroaki, woke up on a bed in the cabin.

"Sir Hiroaki!"

"Hiroaki!"

Inside the cabin were Roanna, Flora, Kouta, and Rei. When they noticed he had regained consciousness, they immediately leaned forward in their seats.

"You guys..." Hiroaki looked around at them and blinked.

"Do you feel any pain anywhere?" Roanna asked worriedly.

"I'm fine. I don't feel any pain anywhere."

Hiroaki sat up and stretched his body as he answered.

"Thank goodness..." Relief spread across the group's faces.

"So I lost to that snobby brat, huh... Damn it. It seems I made you all worry. Sorry."

Hiroaki grimaced at the memory of what had happened before he was knocked out. Despite that, he made sure to apologize to the four of them for making them worry.

"Sir Hiroaki..." The group beamed happily.

"But I'm surprised we all made it out of there safe. What happened?" Hiroaki asked, furrowing his brows.

The majority of the people boarding the ship were noncombatants. The enemy fleet had been advancing on them from the skies, and the situation was clearly hopeless.

"Man, it was a crazy sight. After you were knocked out, a knight came to save us. Then Yamata no Orochi appeared in the lake and bought us enough time to get away," Rei explained excitedly.

"Did you just say Yamata no Orochi?" The look of suspicion on Hiroaki's face harshened.

"Not the weapon, but the move. You showed it to us once before, right? Weren't you the one who used it?"

"Me...? How could I have used it while unconscious?" That shouldn't be possible.

"But I don't know anyone else who could pull off such a move..." Roanna

said, implicitly expressing her belief that Hiroaki had used it. It was the only explanation she could think of for the situation, but she didn't seem fully satisfied by it herself. There was a faint look of confusion on her face.

"That may be true, but... Are you saying I used it in my sleep? That my hero powers awakened when I was asleep?"

"Yes, I believe that to be the case..." Flora said, exchanging a look with Roanna before nodding hesitantly.

"Well, it does sound like a typical turning point in a story." But with no memory of using the move, he wasn't entirely convinced.

"We were able to escape thanks to you, Hiroaki. Everyone on the ship is grateful," Rei reported to him.

"I see..."

"Aren't you happy about it? It's your achievement."

"It doesn't feel like it, so I have nothing to be proud of. Besides..."

I lost to that snobby brat called Renji either way, were the words Hiroaki swallowed with a bitter expression. Whatever the truth was, he wasn't in the mood to celebrate a deed he had no memory of.

"Besides what?" Kouta asked curiously.

"No, it's nothing... What's the Restoration going to do now?"

He had no idea how many people managed to escape, but most of the people on board were noncombatants. They probably didn't have any assets or supplies either. Wouldn't it be difficult to maintain their organization in such a state? That's what Hiroaki thought.

"We're currently headed for Galarc Castle. As soon as we land, Princess Christina intends on asking King Francois for asylum," Roanna explained with a stiff face. Of course, whether or not they accepted was up to Galarc. If they refused, the Restoration would have nowhere to go.

"I see... If there's anything I can do, just say the word."

It seemed that even Hiroaki understood how grim the future was. Whether it was because he had grown attached to the Restoration or because he regretted losing to Renji, he volunteered his assistance, albeit bluntly.

"Oh..." Roanna and Flora gasped quietly and exchanged a look with each other.

"Merely having you here is a huge blessing to the Restoration."

"Yes. And my sister will make sure everything works out!"

They should have felt uneasy, yet they admirably showed no signs of that in their reply.

“I see...” Hiroaki mumbled, then sighed. “Uh...” He opened his mouth to say something to the two of them. But without saying anything specific, he began ruffling his own head.

I’m not really the type to work towards an objective or exert myself for others, but...

Why was it that when he looked at the two girls, who were clearly younger than him, he felt like there was something he could do as well?

It might not be the time to be thoughtlessly making light novels... We’re definitely going to complete that novel one day, though.

What was there he could do? He’d need to give that some careful thought from here on. If he became stronger, would he have more leverage as a hero? Above all, he couldn’t stomach the thought of losing to Renji and his embarrassing behavior.

That’s why...

For now, I need to be able to beat up that brat the next time we fight.

Hiroaki quietly found resolution for his own sake.

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Elsewhere, another hero was opening his eyes after the battle in Rodania. He was Kikuchi Renji, the hero that had assisted the Beltrum army along with Reiss from the Proxia Empire.

“Mrgh...” Renji came to in the noble district of Rodania. The feeling of chilly outside air had stirred him from his sleep. He blinked slowly at the view of the elegant noble district before him.

“Yo, you finally awake?” a man called out to him.

Renji looked in the direction of the voice. “You’re...”

The man who had spoken was a large man with a black sword sheathed at his waist. There was a second man standing beside him. If he recalled correctly, these two were...

“It’s Arein. And this is Lucci. Remember it already, you ungrateful brat.”

“Yeah. Who do you think carried you all the way here?”

These were the mercenaries Reiss often hired as external forces. Position-wise, they were no different from Renji’s status as a mercenary. But while they were of equal status, they hadn’t had any reason to get to know each other until now. In the first place, Renji struggled at remembering names and faces.

Or rather, he didn’t have any interest in others if they didn’t pose a danger to him. He wasn’t interested in associating with others. He personally believed

himself to be a lone wolf going his own way.

However, he was still capable of distinguishing when to feel gratitude or not. On top of that, he was shameless enough not to express gratitude when he didn't want to, but in this case...

"I see. Sorry about that... Lucci, Arein," Renji said with a small sigh.

"Hmph." Lucci and Arein exchanged looks and snorted in satisfaction.

Embarrassed by his expression of gratitude, Renji quickly changed the topic. "So where are we?"

"Rodania."

"I can see that..." Renji fell silent as he tried to look back on his memories, but for some reason he couldn't recall what happened before he fell unconscious.

"What happened?" he asked with a skeptical look.

They had made an attack on the evacuees escaping for the harbor, where he defeated the water hero who didn't understand the difference in their abilities. But that's where his memories ended...

"Some weird guy appeared and defeated you," Lucci explained after a beat.

"I see... I..."

He had fought with someone. That much he remembered. But he couldn't recall their facial features. When he tried to remember their appearance, all that came to his mind were brief flashes of hands and feet. That, and the heavy blow to the back of his head. That was probably what had knocked him out.

Renji touched the back of his head gently. Fortunately, there was no pain.

"From the looks of things, you don't remember that well either," Arein said, upon seeing Renji's reaction.

"What do you mean...?"

"We all remembered everything until we left the scene. But once we left, we all forgot who you fought and what they were like."

"What's happening here?"

"No clue. Mr. Reiss said it could be a powerful magic artifact that prevents recognition..."

Both Arein and Lucci had discontented looks on their faces.

"Something that convenient exists?" Renji's eyes widened in interest.

"We don't know. No one's kept track of every magic artifact that exists in this world. And there are plenty of ancient artifacts that no one knows how to use out there. It wouldn't be strange for there to be artifacts with weird effects," Lucci replied.

"I see... Well, whatever. Where'd Reiss go?" Renji looked around at their

surroundings.

“He’s with Duke Arbor. They failed to capture Princess Christina, so they’re discussing what to do from here.”

“They got away in that situation?”

“After you were knocked out, more troubles occurred. A huge water monster rose from the lake and protected the airship the princess got on. Mr. Reiss suspected the sleeping hero on their side brought out his power somehow,” Arein answered.

“What? That water hero created a monster out of water?” Renji furrowed his brow in disbelief.

“It seemed like he manipulated the water with his Divine Arms. The lake returned to normal once the airship left, but that thing was capable of taking out the city in a single breath. Its power was on par with your ultimate move—Endless Force Blizzard, was it?”

Lucci saw the way Renji’s pride was triggered—and purposefully chose his words to throw more fuel on the fire.

“Just being on par isn’t enough. Water can’t win against ice,” Renji said coolly, but he wasn’t amused by the thought of another hero being strong. From Lucci and Arein’s point of view, it was clear that Renji’s sense of rivalry was burning within him.

I will get stronger... Even stronger than I am now. I don’t have the time to be losing to some coward who fights while hiding their identity.

Contrary to the ice element he controlled, the fighting spirit in Renji’s heart flared.

My strength is what proves my worth.

Renji hated to lose—or rather, he had an intense fixation on strength. No one could defy the strong. The strong were the right, which was why he didn’t want to lose to anyone.

That’s why Renji wanted to be stronger. Strong enough for no one to defy him. He truly believed that he had to get stronger.

And there was someone who thought highly of that competitive spirit.

“If you want to get stronger, I’ll help you out. I want to get better at using this thing too.”

Lucci drew his sword from the sheath at his waist, offering to go along with Renji’s training with a fearless smirk.

“...”

Renji frowned faintly, glaring at the black sword. This was because he had a

bit of a history with Lucci's sword. He had once suffered a terrible defeat from Lucius, the previous owner of the sword.

He would never forget that bitter moment. He always had a competitive personality, but that defeat was the event that made him even more obsessed with strength. That despair, that humiliation, that hopelessness—he never wanted to feel like that again.

Of course, the original owner Lucius was now dead, but...

"What's wrong? Intimidated by the sword our commander used to defeat you?" Lucci asked, delighted at Renji's silence.

"No, I accept. We can train together, but only on the condition that you make the most of that sword's ability."

"Hah, cocky brat. But I'm out to find the bastard that killed the commander and avenge him, so I'll be happy to do just that."

As Lucci's words implied, the members of the Heavenly Lions had also forgotten everything about Rio. Thus, they had also forgotten that he was the one who had killed Lucius, but setting that aside...

This guy's sword specializes in attacking from blind spots. He used it to make a surprise attack from behind earlier too. It'd be good training.

Determined to never lose again, Renji greedily focused on making himself stronger.

Chapter 4: Celia’s Return

The same day that Rodania was attacked by the Beltrum Kingdom’s army, in the afternoon, the evacuation airships from the Restoration arrived in the capital of Galarc.

However, just before the airships landed, someone else arrived at the outskirts of the city—Rio.

After bidding farewell to Celia and Sora on the airship, he had headed for the capital city, Galtuuk, ahead of them. Then, he landed in the forest away from civilization, right beside a spring.

It should be around here... By that tree.

Rio approached a particular tree and stuck his hand in a hole. He took out the mask that could shoulder the penalty of the rules of god hidden inside.

He had left this mask here for Aishia’s sake. She couldn’t wear a mask in her spirit form, so he had left it out here. He had ordered her to use this mask if something happened while they were apart, but there was no sign of the mask’s being used—meaning nothing had happened.

“Haruto.”

Just then, Aishia materialized beside Rio. Their souls were tied together through their contract, so she had sensed him once he had come close enough to the capital.

“Aishia. It seems like things were quiet here.”

“Yup... Nothing major happened. Welcome back.”

There was a faint pause in her sentence as she recalled how Takahisa and Aki had arrived at the Galarc Castle yesterday.

“Where’s Sora?” Aishia wondered, looking around for her.

“She’ll be coming later. The enchanted airship with Celia and the others on board is headed here too. A lot happened—I’ll explain it all, but first... *Dissolvo*.”

Rio used the Time-Space Cache and took out the stone house, setting it down beside the spring.

“Let’s talk inside,” he suggested. There were a few things he had to explain, including how Celia had regained her memories of them.

“Okay. I have to tell you about what happened here too.”

Thus, in the time it took for Celia to arrive in Galtuuk, the two discussed what had happened to themselves while the other was absent.

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Several minutes later, Rio had finished reporting to Aishia about what had happened in Rodania first.

“Celia...regained her memories?” Aishia blinked in a rare display of surprise.

“Even you’re surprised at that, huh? I was shocked too. There wasn’t enough time to talk properly, but I managed to have a quick conversation with her.”

“Thank goodness...” Aishia smiled in relief.

“Yeah...” Rio said softly. “Sora’s going to live in the castle with her for the next few days to exchange information with her. I’m also hoping for Sora to get to know the others.”

“If Sora’s there, everyone will be safe. And if Celia’s there, we don’t have to worry about Sora,” Aishia said. Sora wasn’t the best at interacting with others, so her behavior was a bit of a concern when she was alone.

“Aha ha. That’s true. Could you go check on them later tonight? I’m sure Celia wants to see you again too.”

If she wore the mask, she could hide her spirit presence while she was materialized. Even if Sara and the others returned to the mansion, they wouldn’t notice a contract spirit meeting Celia behind their backs. On the off chance they ran into each other, Aishia could pass as a human in front of them.

“Yup. I want to see Celia too.”

It probably wasn’t Rio’s imagination that Aishia, who was normally expressionless, looked happier today.

“So what did you want to discuss, Aishia?”

“Aki and Takahisa came to the castle,” Aishia reported, this time with a hint of a gloomy expression.

“I see... How did things go?” Rio’s eyes were wide, but his tone was calm. From Aishia’s reaction, it didn’t seem like he was a major issue in the present situation.

However, the incident Takahisa had caused in the past flashed through his head, giving him a twinge of uneasiness. And there was Aki to worry about as well. Rio had noticed that the rift between Miharu and Aki had to do with Amakawa Haruto’s existence.

But he didn’t know what he could do about it. While he possessed Amakawa

Haruto's memories, he didn't live as Amakawa Haruto. He couldn't mediate between the two of them, which made him feel helpless and apologetic. A gloomy cloud constantly hung over him.

"The two of them have reflected and apologized to Miharu and the others. Miharu and Aki have made up properly."

"That's good to hear," Rio replied. While he didn't doubt Aishia's words, he found it hard to believe without seeing it with his own eyes.

"Aki will probably be okay now."

"Really...?"

"Yup. I'm sure of it." Aishia nodded firmly. She had probably watched their exchange in her spirit form.

"I see..." In the end, Miharu and Aki made up without his having to do anything. No, there was no need for him to do anything in the first place, so this was probably for the best.

After all, Aki hated Amakawa Haruto. She would have had conflicted feelings towards Rio, who had Amakawa Haruto's memories. But now that Rio was a transcendent one, Aki had lost her memories of Rio. In other words, she had forgotten that Rio possessed Amakawa Haruto's memories.

If that was the trigger for Miharu and Aki to reconcile, then perhaps there had been meaning to his existence being erased. Rio thought that with a somewhat saddened expression on his face.

But Aishia dispelled his negative thoughts. "Aki has forgotten about Rio, but still remembers Amakawa Haruto. On top of that, she overcame her feelings about him. Even if she remembered you right now, I don't believe she'd change her answer."

"You think...?" The apprehension in his chest felt a little lighter. Aishia had probably seen through his thoughts and said that to ease the weight on his heart. Realizing he was no match for her, Rio smiled wryly.

"They're going to watch the situation some more in regards to Takahisa."

"So it's not like the fact he tried to kidnap Miharu was erased..."

While his punishment seemed a little lenient, he was Aki and Masato's older brother. His sentence had been given with consideration for the two of them. He was also a hero, a figure whose importance was on par with the king of a major kingdom.

"The effect of losing memories about you seemed bigger on Takahisa. He deeply regrets everything now that he's forgotten you, but I don't know how that will affect his actions from here."

What if Takahisa suddenly remembered Rio? He could return to his former self. That was Aishia's implicit analysis.

"I see..." Unable to completely dismiss his concerns, Rio's expression was still a little stiff. But it would be unreasonable to punish Takahisa out of fear he would cause new problems now that he had lost his memories and reflected on his actions.

With his actions restricted by being a transcendent one, there was nothing Rio could do to prevent Takahisa from making a second offense. Which meant...

"For now, let's have Celia observe things once she returns to the mansion. If she doesn't see a problem, then we might not have to do anything."

In the end, Rio's decision was to wait and see.

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Roughly half an hour after Rio arrived in Galtuuk, the five escape airships of the Restoration arrived from Rodania, landing on the city lake.

It was a sudden visit, with no means of giving any warning. The evacuees couldn't disembark from the ship in droves, so a number of representatives headed for the castle first. They were Christina, Duke Huguenot and Celia's father Roland, and they were accompanied by the current residents of the castle: Celia, Sara, Orphia, and Alma. Sora was also with them as they all boarded multiple carriages headed for the castle.

"Okay, so I'll be going with Princess Christina and the others to greet King Francois once we arrive at the castle."

Inside the carriage with Celia, Sara, Orphia, Alma, and Sora, Celia decided to move separately to the others.

"Yup. We'll head back to the mansion first and explain things to everyone."

"Thank you."

"What about her?" Sara asked, looking at Sora. She was wondering whether Sora would be heading with them to the mansion, or to the meeting with Celia.

"What do you want to do, Sora? You can wait at the mansion first," Celia asked, looking at the quiet Sora beside her.

"Wha—! You expect Sora to go somewhere full of strangers alone?!" Sora said, clearly reluctant about that idea.

"You won't be alone, Sara and the others will be with you... Or are you shy around strangers, Sora?"

"S-Sora just doesn't like being surrounded by strangers who force her to talk. Disliking crowds isn't the same as being shy. The Dragon King entrusted Sora to

you, so look after Sora until the end!”

Although she said that, Sora had been living alone in the mountains for over a thousand years. She would never admit it herself, but it was clear that she was shy about meeting new people. That made her seem as childish as her appearance implied.

“It seems she’s completely attached to you,” Orphia said with a smile.

“You think so...?” Celia tilted her head awkwardly.

“Th-That’s not true!” Sora immediately protested.

“Ha ha, children do start acting rebellious around that age.” Alma chuckled.

“Oh? You mean just like you, Alma?”

“I-I was always obedient.” Alma pouted at Sara’s teasing.

“Sora’s obedient too!” She puffed up her cheeks in protest.

“Of course you are. Well, you can come with me to the castle, but you’ll have to wait in another room during the meeting. You’re not allowed to wander around the castle by yourself, got it?”

Celia warned her as though she was speaking to a young child.

“Sora knows that! Who do you take Sora for?!” Her energetic voice echoed throughout the carriage.

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Despite the sudden visit, Francois promptly agreed to an urgent audience with Christina and the others. That was how severe the situation was. Christina, Flora, Duke Gustav Huguenot, Count Roland Claire, Celia, Hiroaki, and Roanna were all in attendance. Sora was waiting in another room nearby.

As soon as the meeting started, Christina gave a brief summary of the events until now.

“I never expected Rodania to fall...” King Francois of Galarc hummed with a grave look.

“They must have aimed for the moment we relaxed after the signing of the agreement.” Christina frowned.

“Even so, it seems far too hasty and high-handed. They must have had an objective they wanted to fulfill no matter what...” Francois said, looking at Christina meaningfully.

“The item was brought out safely,” Christina replied, accurately interpreting his question.

“I see...”

“It was certainly a high-handed move to attack a highly defended fortress

city, but that just shows how much they believed they could win over us. The power of the hero on their side was strong enough to guarantee their victory...”

“You mentioned how the ice hero’s attacks had you cornered...”

“In a single move, the ice hero froze the Aerial Knights protecting Rodania. Hundreds of knights spread across the sky were annihilated instantly,” Christina said, emphasizing Renji’s strength.

“How powerful...”

“I’ve never seen such a disastrous wide-ranged attack. If it had been used on the ground, it would have taken out an army of a thousand soldiers.”

The highest level of attack magic, intended for wide-ranged annihilation, could eradicate a maximum of two to three hundred people in a densely packed area. According to Christina, the attack Renji showed in Rodania was easily several times that scale...potentially ten times or more.

“So the hero’s power was as the legends implied... Hmm... Hmm?” Francois tilted his head with a skeptical look. He felt a sudden sense of déjà vu. He knew that heroes were powerful, but it felt like something similar had happened before.

“Is something the matter?” Christina asked, watching Francois’s expression curiously. The sense of déjà vu quickly vanished.

“No, it’s nothing. There was something else I wanted to ask about—Sir Hiroaki,” Francois addressed Hiroaki with a concerned sigh.

“What?”

“Are you capable of manipulating an attack of such a scale?”

“Who knows... The attack that punk used covered the entire sky. Roanna said my max-output Yamata no Orochi was stronger than the highest level of attack magic, but whether it could cover the entire sky or not is another matter...”

It was most likely impossible for Hiroaki. He didn’t want to admit that out loud out of vexation, but his expression clearly spelled the truth.

“Hmm...” Francois hummed in thought.

“However, the water dragon that appeared on the Rodania lake while we were departing was on par with the ice hero’s attack. Doesn’t that mean Sir Hiroaki has the potential to use attacks of the same scale?” Duke Huguenot stated, presenting his theory based on the assumption that Hiroaki was responsible for the eight-headed serpent that appeared at Rodania.

“Maybe, but it means nothing because I was knocked out. I can try to do it again, but...”

The last time he had brought out Yamata no Orochi, he had been fairly

serious already. He didn't think he could create one several times that scale.

Rio was the one controlling it...

Only Celia knew the truth. However, no one would understand if she tried to explain it, and it would only complicate matters more. She held her tongue in frustration.

"Now that things have come to this, we may need to reevaluate the worth of the heroes' power. We'll have to loop Lady Satsuki in on things later, but what do you say, Sir Hiroaki? Will you cooperate with tests to measure the extent of your power?"

"Sure thing. But where can we do that? If you want us to go all out, I wouldn't recommend the castle grounds." Hiroaki accepted Francois's request readily.

"With power like that, we naturally cannot hold it here. We'll head outside the capital for any tests. Is that agreeable to you, Princess Christina?"

"I have no objections."

"Then I will arrange things on our end. But the tests should be held as confidentially as possible. Please refrain from spreading word elsewhere."

Thus, it was promptly decided that tests would be held to measure the power of the heroes.

To be honest, I have my qualms about this...

Francois sighed wearily as he thought that in his head. He wasn't enthusiastic about the idea because he knew how people could transform when they obtained huge amounts of power. And as a king, he knew just how a group of people could be abused by someone like that.

Until now, Francois had avoided using the hero's power for the military. He didn't think there was any need for Satsuki to fight—especially since he feared that her personality would change if she gained a power too great for her to handle.

Furthermore, if Satsuki gained that much power, faction wars could rise around her, forcing her into fighting in wars for them. That could cause the trust that they had built until now to fall apart.

However, he was no longer able to turn a blind eye to the matter when the threat of the ice hero loomed over the Galarc Kingdom. As the leader of the nation, he had to ensure they had enough deterrent forces to protect the kingdom from attack. It wasn't the wisest idea to entrust the kingdom's defense to a single person, but in this situation, Satsuki was the only person capable of the role.

"Setting aside the matter of the heroes, what does the Restoration intend on

doing from here?" Francois asked Christina. He understood that they had fled here because they had nowhere else to go.

"There are currently a thousand refugees waiting on board our enchanted airships. As long as they are on my side—no, even if I have to proceed alone, I intend on opposing Duke Arbor until the end."

In spite of losing their base, Christina fully intended to keep going. There was quiet but firm resolution in her eyes.

"I see." Francois could see that there was no swaying her decision.

"Hence, I wish to swallow my pride to make a request of you."

"What is that?"

"With Rodania captured, we have nowhere to go. Would you grant us a place to fulfill our organization's activities?" Christina asked, bowing her head deeply. Her request wasn't something that could be treated lightly.

Celia, Flora, Roanna, and Duke Huguenot all bowed their heads with her. Celia's father, Roland, who should have been in a neutral position, did the same. Seeing them eventually prompted Hiroaki to do so as well.

"Hmm..."

Francois didn't answer immediately. Welcoming the remnants of the Restoration into Galarc would result in an inevitable confrontation with the Beltrum Kingdom. It wasn't a matter he could decide easily as a king.

"Everyone is either a noble or a highly educated servant. We will all exert ourselves to serve the Galarc Kingdom until the day we return to the Beltrum Kingdom," Christina pleaded desperately, her head still bowed low. As the First Princess of her nation, she had never had to make such a desperate request before in her life. But she was willing to beg for this request to be heard.

"Please, if you could kindly consider..." she uttered in a trembling voice.

If Francois refused, the refugees would have to face the choice of dying honorably by taking their own lives, surrendering to the Beltrum government, fighting a hopeless war against Duke Arbor, or roaming as nomads. There was no guarantee of their safety if they surrendered, and it was clear that each option promised a harsh future.

"I will arrange accommodations and employment for your people for the time being," Francois said slowly. Whether he accepted the Restoration or not, confrontation with the Beltrum Kingdom was already inevitable.

"Thank you very much!"

The heavy air lifted immediately. Christina's voice nearly cracked with joy as she thanked him. The others bent themselves even lower to convey their

gratitude. However...

"It's still too early to rejoice. I will only make arrangements for those who remain in the Restoration. Be prepared to face a harsher lifestyle than the one you had in Rodania," Francois added. He had no intention of protecting anyone who was just there to leech a free meal.

"Of course, we are fully prepared for that."

"In that case, I will allow you a few days to organize yourselves. During that time, you may borrow the guesthouse as a temporary residence. There will be people among your group who will no longer remain of noble status in this nation. Make sure they understand that when they decide whether to remain in the Restoration or not. In the meantime, we will work on the detailed conditions on our end."

"I cannot thank you enough for such gracious treatment," Christina said, bowing her head again.

"May I say something as well?" Roland asked, raising his hand.

"Go ahead," Francois said.

"I am thinking of returning to the Beltrum Kingdom," Roland stated calmly. The rest of the party were startled at the idea of returning after they had just evacuated.

"It wouldn't hurt to probe into the situation on their side. And I'm the only one who can move around to do that," Roland said, explaining his reasoning. Of course, he wasn't going to surrender, and he wasn't going to double-cross them by abandoning the losing side and joining Beltrum instead.

Roland was the head of the noble family that was second closest to the royal family after the Fontaines—Roanna's family—so no one doubted him in that regard.

"Because of the previous agreement, you mean?" Francois asked with a grim look.

The agreement he was referring to was the one made between Christina and Duke Arbor about the Restoration and the Beltrum government. In that agreement, the treatment of Count Claire's family was explicitly stated. That was, in exchange for the Restoration's return of Charles Arbor, the Beltrum government would guarantee the position and safety of the Count Claire family. The people of Count Claire's family would also serve as messengers in future communication between Beltrum and the Restoration. But in the current situation, how well was Count Claire's position protected through that agreement?

“The other side launched a surprise attack before the conditions of the agreement could be fulfilled. It’s rather questionable whether they’ll keep to the rest of the agreement.”

Christina was extremely dubious. Roland’s daughter Celia was similarly skeptical. Her expression was plagued with concern.

“Perhaps so. But as the head of a count family, remaining in Galarc could be seen as abandonment of my neutral position. That’s why I think it’d be best to return shamelessly! Ha ha ha!” Roland laughed heartily.

“In that case, I shouldn’t remain here either...” Celia said, wondering whether she should return with him.

“The problem is in the two of us remaining in the same place, Celia. With one of us staying with the Restoration and the other at Beltrum, we can explain ourselves as placing personnel on each side.”

With King Francois and the other people in their surroundings watching on, Roland refrained from doting on his daughter in his usual tone, but he still spoke to her with a fatherly look.

“In that case, I could go instead...”

“You’ve been so engrossed in your research from a young age, you wouldn’t have the connections even if you went, no?”

“That’s...” Celia couldn’t deny that.

“I’m the most suitable for the role. There’ll be other things that only you can do too.”

“Father...”

“Focus on the things that you can do here in Galarc. Got it?”

“I understand...”

“And so, I will be returning to Beltrum. As early as tomorrow morning, if possible. Is that agreeable with you, Your Highness?”

With the conversation between parent and child over, Roland turned to seek Christina’s approval.

“Very well...”

Thus, it was decided that Roland would return to the Beltrum Kingdom alone.

◇ ◇ ◇

Roughly an hour after the meeting between the Restoration and Francois began, Satsuki and the Galarc group finished receiving an update of events from the spirit folk girls in the mansion dining room.

The air was heavy with silence. Takahisa had followed Lilianna to the mansion earlier, so they were both present as well.

Satsuki, Miharu, Aki, Masato, and Takahisa were all born and raised in Japan with no experience of war. Their expressions had been stiff the entire time they listened to Sara speak, and were still stiff now.

“War is never pleasant,” Gouki said with a sigh, guessing at what they were thinking. “It affects you whether you wish to be a part of it or not. Sometimes it affects you even when you weren’t a part of it. That’s what it feels like, at least.”

As a veteran warrior who had participated in numerous wars, his words came from real experience.

“I agree... I never thought Celia and the others would get involved in war.” Satsuki frowned bitterly. She knew that the relationship between Beltrum and the Restoration wasn’t the best, but she hadn’t expected it to develop into actual conflict.

Her opinion was probably influenced by her peaceful upbringing, but like Gouki had said, it felt like she was now being affected by things too.

“I’m so relieved you all came back safely... Thank you for returning, Sara, Orphia, Alma.” Latifa rejoiced in their return with an emotional look.

“Suzune...”

“Thank you.”

“Right.”

The three spirit folk girls smiled happily.

“War is—it’s unforgivable. It shouldn’t happen. The things that happen during war would normally be considered crimes. Killing so many people and forcing submission through sheer strength is absolutely wrong.”

Takahisa expressed his disdain for war with intense anger in his tone. It was hard to believe this was the same person who had tried to take Miharu to the Centostella Kingdom through sheer force, but pointing that out now would change the matter at hand.

“Right... I agree with the sentiment against war,” Satsuki said in a calmer tone.

“Murder is evil. It’s an absolute evil. War that promotes the murder of people is equally evil...” Takahisa muttered to himself. The way he denounced murder and war had surpassed the realms of moral values, bordering on some kind of deep-seated grudge. It was almost as if his mind was possessed by negative thoughts.

“Is something the matter, Sir Takahisa?”

Lilianna noticed the abnormal reaction and peered at his face from the seat beside him.

“Ah, Lily...” Takahisa snapped back to his senses.

“No, I was just wondering why people are capable of starting wars for their own benefit. How can they choose to kill others without hesitation? There has to be something wrong with them if they can find joy in the benefit of killing others. Only the lowest of scum would do such a thing to disturb order. Isn’t that right?”

He spoke of own sense of justice, expressing his hatred for war.

“I won’t deny that. However, war will happen regardless. We humans walk upon a bloodstained history, and it’s important that we do not hide. I wonder what it would take to lose all war in this world.”

Lilianna avoided outright agreement with Takahisa and made reference to the numerous wars mankind had gone through until now. Then, she gave a strained smile.

“Only people who cannot understand the pain of others create war. They don’t live with enough consideration for others. So many people die during war, yet those who survive laugh without a care once the war ends. It’s foolish,” Takahisa said with a bitter look.

“Hmm... I do understand what you’re saying, but...it all depends on how you look at it, how you feel about it, and the strength of your heart, I think. And that varies from person to person. It doesn’t have to be war for something painful to happen to someone, and there’s nothing wrong if they try to pick themselves up and return to their daily lives with a smile... You never know if they just look fine on the outside...” Satsuki seemed to have her own opinion on Takahisa’s view. But she struggled to organize her thoughts on the spot and couldn’t find the right words.

“Is it okay for me to feel happy that Sara and Celia and everyone came back? It should be okay... Right?” Latifa asked with a worried look.

She was glad that everyone had come back safely. That was the strongest emotion that surged within her. But at the same time, there would have been many people who died in that battle.

So was she permitted to rejoice in the safe return of her friends, or was it imprudent? After hearing what Takahisa said just now, she started doubting herself.

“See, that’s why you can’t say that. When the people important to you return alive, you should be allowed to celebrate that. You should be allowed to smile.

It’s not like you’re laughing without a care in the world... Jumping to conclusions and calling people imprudent before listening to them is what creates the conflicts in the first place.” Satsuki sighed, still unable to gather her thoughts.

“I believe you are allowed to celebrate, Lady Suzune, Satsuki,” Gouki stated clearly, dispelling the concerns in Latifa and Satsuki’s hearts.

“Gouki...”

“Rejoicing in the return of a friend and grieving for the dead are feelings that can coexist. Feeling relief to see a friend alive doesn’t mean you feel nothing for those who have passed away.”

Gouki gave his advice as a leader in life, having seen numerous people with similar concerns until now. On top of that—

“There are those who fought to protect and died, and those who were protected and returned. Thus, those who have died should be hailed for their sacrifice, and those who return should be celebrated. Otherwise those who died won’t be able to rest in peace. At least, that’s my personal view of it,” he concluded.

“It feels like you explained everything perfectly. Thank you.”

Satsuki gave him a quiet round of applause in wonder.

“I’ve merely lived longer than the rest of you. I’ve participated in war and witnessed the end of many at war. I’ve also killed others during battle... But that’s a little too violent to discuss at the dining table. Forgive me.”

Gouki had a faraway look in his eyes as he spoke, but the slip of the tongue had him scrambling back to his senses.

“It was also too preachy and long-winded. Please accept my apologies, everyone.” Kayoko sighed in exasperation, bowing her head beside Gouki.

“Bwa ha ha, that may be true.” Gouki laughed heartily. The exchange of the married couple dispelled the gloomy air in the room.

“All right. Let’s celebrate Celia’s return when she gets back, Suzune.”

“Yup!” All traces of hesitation disappeared from Satsuki and Latifa’s expressions.

“I’m going to make a warm meal tonight... The best one I can!” Miharu announced enthusiastically. She also wanted to celebrate Celia and the spirit folk girls’ return.

“Oh, then I’ll help out, Miharu,” Orphia immediately offered.

“But the meal will be to celebrate your return...”

“It’s fine, I want to do this. Just like always, right?”

“I see. Okay.” Miharu nodded happily.

“I’ll help too! Let’s make something together again, Aki. Just like before, right?”

“Yup. Okay.” Aki also nodded happily at Latifa’s invitation. The other girls also offered to participate one after another, and in the end it was decided that everyone would cook together like usual.

“This mansion is nice... Everyone’s so warm, like a family. It makes me want to live here forever,” Takahisa murmured with envy. Only Lilianna and Masato, who were seated on either side of him, heard him.

Just then, a number of people entered the dining room. It was Celia, Roland, and Sora, who had just returned from the meeting at the castle.

“We’re home... Ah, everyone’s in the dining room like I thought.” Celia spotted the familiar faces gathered in the dining room and relaxed in relief.

“Welcome home, Celia.” Everyone turned to Celia and called out to her happily.

“What are you all up to?” For some reason, the air felt a little different from normal. Celia blinked at them blankly.

“Everyone’s just glad you’re home safe,” Charlotte answered with a giggle.

Celia smiled softly. “Princess Charlotte... Thank you very much.”

“Good day, Count Claire. I heard about what happened in Rodania. Please make yourselves comfortable tonight. It seems like everyone will be cooking dinner together.”

Charlotte spoke as though it was already assumed that Roland would stay the night. She had made the arrangements the moment he arrived with Celia.

“Thank you for the consideration...” Roland held a hand against his chest and expressed his deep gratitude.

“Who’s that, by the way?” Satsuki asked after Sora, who was hiding behind Celia.

“Oh, that’s right. We haven’t explained that yet.” Sara suddenly recalled what she had failed to explain. She hadn’t forgotten entirely, but it may have been a symptom of the rules of god in effect.

“It’s okay, I can do the explaining,” Celia said to Sara. “This is Sora. She was separated from her guardian during the chaos at Rodania and will be in my care for a while. Would it be okay for her to live in this mansion with us? There’s a spare bed in my room, so she can stay with me.” After introducing Sora to everyone, she turned to ask Charlotte for permission. While the official owner of the mansion was Satsuki, decisions like this had to go through Charlotte.

Everyone’s gazes focused on Sora.

“Hmph...” Sora wasn’t used to being the center of attention, so she quickly hid behind Celia. That seemed to stir a protective urge in Satsuki, who got up from her chair and approached Sora. She crouched down and smiled at her from the same eye level.

“Huh... What a cute child. I’m Satsuki. It’s nice to meet you, Sora.”

“She’s adorable! I’m Suzune, by the way!”

“And I’m Komomo!”

The youngest two took the initiative to stand up from their seats and gather around Sora. The others were also drawn into getting up and formed a circle surrounding them. Everyone stared at Sora’s adorable childlike appearance with fond looks.

“Oh...?” Gouki and the adults from Yagumo were wide-eyed with curiosity. Sora’s name sounded like a name from their homeland, and the clothes she wore were also similar to those worn in the Yagumo region.

“Argh, how suffocating! Get away, get away! Stop looking at Sora! Shoo!”

“H-Hey...” Sora grabbed Celia and used her as a shield to keep her distance from those drawing near her.

“It’s okay, there’s no need to be afraid,” Latifa said. She stuck her head around Celia and tried to peer at Sora’s face with Komomo.

“Hssh!” Sora hissed at them like a wary cat.

“So cute!”

It seemed like Sora had won over everyone’s hearts.

“As you can see, she’s got a bit of a sharp tongue... But she’s a good person, so please give her some leniency. Go on, you have to greet everyone properly too.” Celia bowed her head, then made Sora stand beside her.

“Hmph... Please take care of Sora.” Sora bowed reluctantly.

Satsuki immediately turned to Charlotte. “Let’s take her in, Char.”

“That’s fine with me. This mansion is Lady Celia’s home too,” Charlotte agreed readily.

“Thank you very much.” Celia gently pushed Sora’s back and made her bow her head with her.

“Come to think of it, is Ayase Miharu among this group?” Sora asked, looking around the room. She had just remembered that Ayase Miharu was the reincarnation of the Seven Wise God Lina.

“Umm, that would be me...” Miharu raised her hand curiously. She had yet to introduce herself, yet she had been called out by name. Sora marched straight up

to her.

This woman is Lina's reincarnation.

Sora menacingly glared up at Miharu's face from close up, but because of her young and adorable appearance, there was no power behind the gesture.

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“Have you really forgotten everything? Is there nothing left at all?” she asked.

“Umm... What?” Miharu tilted her head in confusion.

“You’re really like a different person,” Sora mumbled.

“Hmm?”

Everyone was puzzled by why Sora knew Miharu’s name and what she was saying.

“Err, I taught her everyone’s names on the way here. But what’s wrong, Sora?”

Celia was equally puzzled as everyone else, but she managed to come up with a lie on the spot to clear the suspicion regarding Miharu’s name. However, that didn’t answer Celia’s own questions. She stared at Sora’s face in search of the truth.

Sora shook her head with a sigh. “It’s nothing.”

“Incidentally, that outfit resembles the clothing of the Yagumo region. May I ask where you procured it from?” Gouki asked, voicing his interest in Sora’s clothes.

“This...was bought from a market while Sora was traveling.”

Sora lived at the peak of a mountain towards the Yagumo side of the Wilderness, and her clothes were procured on the few occasions that she descended to buy things from Yagumo. But telling the truth would only create trouble, so she omitted most of her explanation. It was something she bought from a market in the Yagumo region, so she wasn’t lying either.

“Oh? Then it must have been made by a descendant of someone who wandered here from the Yagumo region.” Gouki nodded, making his own conclusion from that answer.

“On another note, I see Aki has returned,” Celia said, turning to Aki. She had noticed Aki in the room earlier, but there hadn’t been an opportunity to bring it up until now.

“That’s right, we were also shocked when we returned just now.”

“They arrived at Galarc yesterday.”

Orphia and Miharu informed Celia of what had happened. From the way Miharu had her arm wrapped gently around Aki’s shoulder, Celia sensed that they had reconciled.

“I see... Hi there, Aki. It’s good to see you again.”

“I feel the same way... I’m sorry for all the commotion.” Aki hung her head apologetically.

Celia smiled at her softly. “If you’ve made up, then I have nothing else to say. I’m happy for you.”

“Aki, who is this?”

Just then, Takahisa approached Aki, seeking an introduction to Celia.

“Oh, Takahisa. This is Celia. We were in her care back before the banquet happened.”

“Huh?” Celia was startled when she heard her call him Takahisa. She had heard about the events of the banquet after it had all happened. That is, how Takahisa feared that Rio and Miharu would get together and tried to kidnap Miharu to prevent just that.

“Hi, it’s nice to meet you. I’m Sendo Takahisa, Aki’s older brother.” Takahisa introduced himself with a bright smile, showing no notice of Celia’s stiff expression or shame for his past behavior.

“Ah... I’m Celia. It’s nice to meet you too.”

Huh? What happened here? What does this mean? Why is he acting so bright and cheerful after what he did?

Questions like that filled Celia’s head, leaving her on the verge of a breakdown. But she wasn’t born as a noblewoman for nothing. She somehow managed to force her words out with an uncomfortable smile.

Is it because he forgot about Rio? Is that why he came here with Aki?

“Aki and Masato have been very kind to me. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, great hero.” Celia guessed at the reason why Takahisa was here, calmed herself, and greeted him properly.

“Takahisa is fine—there’s no need to call me by that title. It’s nice to see Aki making some same-aged friends.” Takahisa scratched at his cheek shyly.

“Celia’s older than you, Takahisa,” Aki said with disgust.

“Wait, really?!” He had assumed she was older than Aki, but younger than himself. Takahisa gazed at her, flabbergasted.

“I’ll be twenty-one this year.”

“Twenty... Twenty... Huh...?”

Takahisa stared at Celia in disbelief. Now matter how he looked at it, she didn’t appear older than a second- or third-year middle schooler.

“Hello, I’m Celia’s father, the head of the Count Claire house, Roland. It’s an honor to meet the great hero of the Centostella Kingdom.” Roland interrupted their conversation as though to stop Takahisa from hitting on his beloved daughter.

“I-It’s nice to meet you, Count Claire.” Takahisa shrank back at Roland’s

intimidating aura.

Seeing that made Satsuki sigh. “Anyways, how did things go with Princess Christina and Princess Flora? Are they in good health?” she asked Celia.

“Yes, the two appear perfectly fine on the outside. But I fear the two may be somewhat shocked by the turn of events.” Celia must have been worried for Christina and Flora’s mental states. There was a hint of sadness to her smile as she replied.

“I see...”

All the girls living in this mansion had some level of interaction with Christina and Flora. Like Celia, they all worried about the two of them with gloomy expressions.

“They must have lots on their mind right now, so let’s invite them here another time. I consider the two of them to be my friends,” Charlotte suggested.

“Yes please. I’m sure they would be delighted.” Celia nodded happily.

Chapter 5: Secret Meeting

The night Celia and the others returned to the mansion, Celia brought Sora to her bedroom. Dinner was over, they had finished bathing, and everyone had returned to their rooms for the night.

“You can use that bed.”

“Okay.” Sora nodded and sat down on the bed. Celia sat on her own bed, facing her.

“How was it? Do you think you can get along with everyone?” she asked.

“Sora has no intention of making friends,” Sora answered bluntly.

“You say that, but you wolfed down that dinner so hungrily. You also seemed happy to hear everyone explain the dishes.”

“Th-The dishes are innocent. And that’s not true at all! They were so annoying!” Sora denied in a shrill voice.

“You can be more honest to yourself, you know?”

“M-More importantly, the nuisances are finally out of the way. There were still other things Sora needed to talk about,” Sora said, changing the topic.

“That’s right...” Celia agreed with a listless sigh.

“What’s wrong? Why the long face?”

“It’s just that everyone’s forgotten about Rio... After spending the day with everyone, I realized that all over again. I’m the only one who remembers him, everyone else has forgotten—and that makes me feel really alienated...”

All the memories they had made together were gone, as if she had gone through a different past to everyone else.

“But...” Celia continued, looking at Sora.

Sora tilted her head in suspicion. “What?”

“Rio, Aishia, and you... You’re all far lonelier than I am. You’re the ones who have been forgotten by everyone, who have had your relationships severed, who have to stay separated from them...” Celia mumbled miserably.

“Sora only needs her connection with the Dragon King... As long as she has the Dragon King, Sora isn’t lonely at all.”

Whether she was bluffing or speaking her true feelings aside, Sora looked down as she spoke. There was something about the sight of her like that which

felt forlorn to Celia.

“What did you do until you met Rio? The Dragon King passed away in the Divine War over a thousand years ago, right?” she asked, searching Sora’s expression.

“Sora just waited for the time to pass.”

“Wait... Were you by yourself the whole time?”

“So what if Sora was? Even without the Dragon King around, the rules of god still applied to Sora. It was only natural.”

“Wasn’t it really lonely by yourself?”

“Sora said no already. Not as long as she has the Dragon King.”

“Sora...” Celia was the one who put on a lonesome face.

“Don’t make that face. Are you pitying Sora?” Sora pouted irritably.

“I’m not, that’s not it. It’s just...”

A thousand years. For a thousand years, Sora was bound to the rules of god by herself.

Perhaps it was because of the rules of god that Sora never bothered to interact with others. They would forget her anyway. That’s why she gave up from the beginning, believing there was no point in making friends. Perhaps she had to tell herself she didn’t want to make friends in the first place as a form of defense to protect her heart.

Such thoughts flashed through Celia’s head. Of course, it was possible that Sora truly didn’t believe she needed any friends. But if not...

She didn’t bother making friends, because no one would remember her.

“Just what?”

“I just want to get to know you better. So will you be my friend? I mean—we’re already friends, aren’t we?” Celia said cheerfully. She wanted to be friends with Sora.

“Huh?” Sora let out a noise of crazed disbelief.

“Because we’re both deeply connected to Rio, right? And they say a friend of a friend is a friend.”

“What kind of dumb reasoning is that...?”

“There’s no logic to friendship. All we need to become friends is the desire to be friends.”

“You want to be friends with Sora?” Sora asked skeptically, staring at her in wonder.

“That’s right. In fact, I consider us friends already. Didn’t I just say that?” Celia nodded without any hesitation.

“What a pushy person...”

“That’s right. I’m being pushy. I think of you as a friend because I want to. And I’m telling this to you of my own accord. That’s all there is to it.”

“...” Sora was speechless.

Her selfishness is vividly similar to Lina’s.

Why was it?

We’re already friends, aren’t we?

Now that she thought about it, she was once told something similar by someone.

“What about you, Sora? Do you consider me a friend already?” Celia asked, peering into Sora’s face.

Sora looked away in a huff, dismissing Celia coldly. “Do what you want. Sora will also do what she wants, and Sora doesn’t consider you a friend.”

Although she’d had her friendship rejected, Celia smiled gently. “How stubborn... But fine. You can stay that way for now.”

“Hmph. Weirdo. Stop acting all buddy-buddy with Sora,” Sora snapped dismissively. She then glanced at Celia, watching for her reaction to being treated coldly.

“Oh, but there’s one thing I’d like to say to you...”

“What?”

“I’m not a weirdo, I’m Celia. My name is Celia. Got it?” Celia warned, puffing her cheeks up at Sora.

“The only person Sora respects is the Dragon King.”

“Regardless of respect, calling people by their names when you address them is plain politeness. Depending on who you’re talking to, you could get into big trouble if you don’t speak politely. Make sure you address people like Princess Charlotte and Princess Lilianna with their titles.”

Fortunately, no such problems occurred today, and Charlotte and Lilianna were both accepting enough to overlook such things anyway, but acting impolitely outside the mansion would most likely be an invitation for trouble.

“This sounds like a lecture.”

“That’s right, I used to be a teacher. I was Rio’s teacher too, you know?”

Sora’s eyes widened in surprise. “The Dragon King’s teacher? Some weirdo like you?”

“It’s Celia.”

“...You were the Dragon King’s teacher, Celia?” Sora said reluctantly.

“That’s right. I taught him for five years, back when he was as young as

you," Celia replied proudly.

"Hmph. Sora isn't young. Don't treat Sora like a child," Sora said, pursing her lips in a sulking pout.

"Right, you're a lot older than I am..."

Although you sure don't look like it, Celia thought as she stared closely at Sora. As someone who was constantly mistaken for a preteen girl, Celia could finally understand the feelings of those who made the wrong assumptions.

"Stop looking at Sora like she's a child already. And if you're going to compare how long we've known the Dragon King, then Sora's been with him for a thousand years. Our history is different from a nobody like you. Got it?" Sora boasted, refusing to lose to Celia.

Celia narrowed her eyes. "You called me a 'nobody'..."

"A-Anyways! Stop treating Sora like a child. The only person allowed to do that is the Dragon King." Sora dodged the question, her voice squeaking awkwardly.

"Fine. But in exchange, you have to refer to important people by their name and title. If you're not a child, you can do that much, right?"

"Guh... That's a different matter from this."

"Even so, you don't want to cause trouble for Rio either, right? How do you think Rio would feel if he heard you caused problems?" Celia warned Sora by bringing up Rio's name. It seemed to have an immediate effect.

"Hmph... Fine." Sora nodded obediently, albeit reluctantly.

"Good. Now let's move on to the main matter at hand," Celia said, changing the topic. "What is this broken mask for?" She picked up the mask she had left on the shelf beside her bed.

"That is a special magic artifact that helps evade the rules of god by bearing their effects."

"Huh...? But Rio and Aishia are still forgotten by everyone."

The transcendent ones were forgotten by the world every time they used their power. From that point onward, they became existences that had very little presence or memorability. That was all Celia knew of the rules right now, so she wondered why the evasion of the rules wasn't working.

"That's not the rule being evaded here. This item bears the penalty for when a transcendent one intervenes with the world," Sora said, correcting Celia's mistake.

"So there were more rules. What are the details of that one?"

"Transcendent ones possess the power to change the world, so they're not

allowed to get thoughtlessly involved in the matters of the world. That's why the rules of god forbid the transcendent ones from using their power on behalf of specific individuals or groups. If they break that rule..."

"If they break it..." Celia gulped nervously.

"The transcendent one will forget everything about the people they tried to help."

"Huh...?"

"The transcendent ones have power rivaling god, so god deemed it unfair for them to support the interests of individuals. That's why this rule exists." Sora stifled her emotions, flatly explaining the rules with a sullen look.

"If Rio and Aishia fought for our sakes...both of them would forget about us? Instead of us forgetting about them?"

"That's what Sora's saying," Sora confirmed bluntly.

"N-No! That's— That can't happen! No, absolutely not!" Celia yelled in a panic, the blood draining from her face.

"Reality doesn't care about your opinion."

"Is that why this mask is broken, then...?"

"In today's battle, the Dragon King took a huge risk to save all of you. That's why this mask was worn down and cracked. That's what it means."

"That can't be..." Celia fell speechless at the knowledge that Rio had risked his memories to save them.

"As long as this mask is used, the Dragon King can fight for someone without losing his memory. But there are only five masks in existence, including this one. If he has to keep saving all of you like he did today, they'll be used up in an instant. Once that happens, he'll have to fight at the sacrifice of his memories," Sora said with a strict expression.

"Though the Dragon King would probably do that for all of you," she added sadly.

"You've only just met Rio, but you understand him well." Celia gave Sora an impressed look.

"Like Sora said already, Sora's been with the Dragon King for a thousand years. Even reincarnated, the Dragon King is the Dragon King. Of course Sora knows him," Sora snapped as though she had just been insulted.

"I'm sorry for looking down on you, Sora. I get it now." Honestly speaking, she was amazed. But at the same time, she didn't want to lose. She prided herself as the person who cared about Rio more than anyone else. That's why, as fellow companions who would be around each other for a long time from here on, she

apologized to Sora.

"As long as you understand." Sora nodded approvingly.

"We'll have to do something about this, then. The best option would be for Rio and Aishia to avoid fighting forever, but..."

"That would be too easy. And you're all too weak for that."

"I can't deny that... We've been protected by Rio and Aishia this entire time. But..."

When Celia regained her memories today, she also learned several new magic spells. If she used them, she could potentially produce a power beyond anything she had been capable of until now. Celia stared down at her hands in thought.

However, she purposefully chose not to argue with Sora. Insisting that she had gotten stronger would only sound like a bluff at this moment. She would prove her strength through her actions, not her words. That's what Celia thought.

"You need to do better. You might be weak, but Sora has *some* hope for your brain," Sora said, emphasizing the "some." But it was clear she was just too embarrassed to praise Celia honestly. That's why...

"Oh my, is that so?" Celia replied happily.

"It pains Sora to admit this, but the Seven Wise Gods and their disciples were true geniuses. You resemble Lina's homunculus disciple, and you seem to have inherited certain characteristics of it when your memories returned, so Sora has hope. You might be the key to slipping past the rules of god... You, and Ayase Miharu."

"Come to think of it, you knew Miharu's name already, didn't you? How come?"

Celia recalled what had happened when Sora first visited the mansion today. She had looked around at the residents and asked for Ayase Miharu.

"Right, Sora still hasn't explained that. Ayase Miharu is the reincarnation of the Seven Wise God, Lina," Sora said, revealing the rather shocking truth without hesitation.

"Huh?" Celia was unable to comprehend her words and reacted as though she had misheard her.

"There should also be some kind of connection between you and Ayase Miharu. Do you have any ideas?"

"Huh? W-Wait a minute. Ayase Miharu as in Miharu? Miharu is the reincarnation of a Wise God?" Unable to believe her ears, Celia repeated herself just to be sure.

“That’s what Sora’s saying. So, any ideas?”

“I-I don’t know... But are you sure?”

Although she had finally understood the part about Miharu being the reincarnation of the Seven Wise God Lina, Celia still doubted whether it was the truth.

“Aishia was the one who said it. She was created by Lina for the sake of the Dragon King, and Ayase Miharu is the reincarnation of Lina. As long as she’s not lying, then it’s the truth. Why are you so skeptical?”

“Because Miharu’s just a normal girl, you know? Imagining her as one of the Six Wise Gods, the gods worshipped in the Strahl region, is just...”

“Oh right, those arrogant guys dubbed themselves the Six Wise Gods when they took over the Strahl region. But Lina is the seventh Wise God that was exiled, so she wasn’t worshipped by anyone. In the first place, the Wise Gods aren’t even gods. They’re fake gods that were given the role of fulfilling the real god’s duties,” Sora said, denouncing the Seven Wise Gods.

“Umm... Doesn’t that kind of make them gods? If they were given the role of god by the real god...” Celia said, tilting her head. Either way, they were supernatural existences that mankind viewed as gods.

“Well, you can think of them however you please. Sora considers the Dragon King her god, after all.” Sora puffed up with pride.

“Right... Rio’s past past life as the Dragon King was on par with the Seven Wise Gods, you mean?”

“You’ve got a dopey look on your face, are you sure you understand? The Dragon King is a very, *very* high and mighty person.”

Sora spread her arms to express the extent of Rio’s magnificence. The sight of her doing that was so cute, it conveyed just how much she loved Rio.

“You only care about Rio.” Celia giggled.

“It sounds like you don’t understand at all.” Sora sighed tiredly.

“They’re just such unreachable existences, it doesn’t feel realistic. Hearing that Rio’s past past life was the Dragon King, and Miharu’s past life was a Seven Wise God, I mean.”

Besides, to Celia, Rio was Rio. Even if he was a godlike being in the life before his past life, that didn’t change who he was now to her.

“Well, you’re right about the Dragon King being an unreachable existence. Just know that Ayase Miharu is the reincarnation of that nasty goddess Lina, and you might be the reincarnation of her disciple. Those are the least of the facts you should keep in mind.”

“It sounds like my past life is mostly conjecture... But okay. It doesn’t change what I have to do.”

“Sora is glad to see you’re motivated, but what are you planning on doing?”

“I’m going to start with an analysis of this mask. I’ll search for a way of reproducing it. At the same time, I’m going to investigate the spell formulas embedded in my body and check that there isn’t anything strange about them. That may provide a clue to why I regained memories of the transcendent ones when I’m neither a transcendent one nor one of their disciples.” Celia stared at the mask in her hand.

“Do you think you can do it...?”

“I won’t know until I try, but I learned some useful spells when I regained my memories, so I’d say it isn’t impossible... Maybe.” She had yet to test the spells herself, so she couldn’t say anything for sure yet.

“Th-Then try to analyze the mask right now!” Sora urged excitedly.

“...Hmm?”

Sora seemed to sense something, as she turned towards the window. As soon as she did, a knock could be heard from the other side.

“Who is that?” Celia whispered.

The fact they had knocked was possibly to show they had no hostility. But she still had to be cautious of someone visiting their window at a late hour like this.

“Hey, you get far away from the window.” Sora ordered Celia to back away, then approached the window alone to protect her. She flung the curtain open to reveal—

“Aishia!” Celia beamed happily.

“Hmph. It’s just you.”

Sora snorted coldly, but she opened the window for Aishia to come in.

“Long time no see, Celia. Short time no see, Sora?” Aishia greeted them with a wave, tilting her head to the side. She wore a mask on her face.

“Where’s the Dragon King?” Sora leaned out of the window, looking around at the sky.

“Haruto told me what happened, so I came to see Celia. Haruto’s in the stone house. We couldn’t come to the castle together, so I came alone.”

“Tch.” She must have wanted to see Rio. Sora clicked her tongue in disappointment, turning away from the window.

“There, there, Sora. Come inside, Aishia. I’ve missed you.”

Celia could understand Sora’s feelings—she wanted to see Rio too. But she

had also wanted to see Aishia. She soothed Sora while smiling and inviting Aishia inside. However...

“Haruto wants to see the two of you as well. Shall we all go to him?” Aishia suggested lightly, as though inviting them on a walk.

“Huh? Can we?”

Celia was happy just to see Aishia again, but she’d be even happier seeing Rio. She couldn’t hide her true feelings from appearing on her face at the opportunity of doing so.

“Yup, as long as no one in the mansion finds out.”

Rio had seen Aishia off by telling her to enjoy herself at the mansion, but he hadn’t said she couldn’t bring both of them back. That’s why she thought of bringing the two back to see him.

“Th-Then...”

Celia wasn’t able to suppress her desire to see Rio. She was about to cheerfully say, “Let’s go,” when—

“What are you two doing? If you’re not coming, Sora will go first. Bye.”

Sora was already on the balcony, ready to depart. Nothing would stop her from going, and she urged Celia and Aishia to hurry along too.

“W-Wait a minute, I have to turn off the lights in the room first...”

Celia rushed to prepare for their late-night departure from the mansion.

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With Celia in Aishia’s arms, Aishia and Sora flew through the sky and over to the outskirts of the capital where the stone house was hidden in the forest. They made their way inside the house and the three of them lined up in the entryway.

“...And that’s why I brought them with me,” Aishia said, concluding her explanation.

“Aha ha...” Rio laughed flatly in confusion. He hadn’t expected Aishia to bring Celia and Sora back with her.

“Sorry... I ended up coming here,” Celia apologized shyly.

“There’s nothing to be sorry about. I’m happy to see you again too.”

With so many experienced fighters like Gouki living in the mansion, Rio had decided against sneaking in with Aishia in order to avoid being noticed. But if she was going to do this, perhaps he should have just gone with her in the first place.

But it was important they reduce the risk of being noticed as much as they

could, even if it took extra effort. Now that Rio was a transcendent one, he had to avoid being noticed as much as possible—it was undoubtedly safer for Aishia to go check on Celia alone, as she could always flee in her spirit form. And by bringing Celia back to the stone house, there was no need to lower their voices. That was what Rio decided to believe, anyway.

"It'll probably be best to return quickly, but we might as well talk a bit now that you're here. Let's head to the living room first," Rio said, inviting them inside.

Celia nodded happily. "Okay!" she said, walking forward. Aishia started forward as well, and Rio was about to follow them when he noticed Sora fidgeting behind him.

"Shall we go too, Sora?" he called out to her.

"Yes! Right away!" Sora replied immediately, walking to the left of Rio.

There wasn't much distance from the entryway to the living room, but Rio decided to start a conversation with her anyway. "How's life at the mansion? Do you think you can handle it?" he asked.

"Yes! Sora will fulfill the duty she was given by the Dragon King!" she replied proudly.

"I see. It's really reassuring to have you with Celia. Thank you."

"Sora's only doing what needs to be done. Heh. He heh." She giggled, beaming happily at the praise.

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“Sora’s been a big help by teaching me things,” Celia added.

“Celia shows some promise too,” Sora replied, failing to hide how pleased she was.

“Hmph. Don’t get ahead of yourself.”

“Aha ha, I’m glad to see you’re getting along. Now let’s sit down.”

Like that, the four of them entered the living room. At Rio’s prompting, the group made their way over to the sofa.

“Come now, Dragon King. You should sit over here!”

Sora rushed ahead and secured a seat to offer to Rio.

“Thanks. I guess I’ll sit there, then.” Rio accepted the seat with an amused smile, feeling like he was going along with the whims of a child. Celia made note of his position and immediately moved to take the seat across from him.

I can see Rio’s face clearly from here.

She smiled happily to herself. Meanwhile, Aishia naturally moved to sit beside Rio, but...

“Wait! Hold it right there, Aishia!” Sora shouted in shock. “What do you think you’re doing, naturally taking the spot beside the Dragon King?! The Dragon King’s side is reserved for his one and only disciple, Sora! Know your place!” she ranted, rebuking Aishia for her actions.

“I’m Haruto’s one and only contract spirit.”

“D-Don’t copy Sora! You wanna go at it? Sora will fight you! Let’s take this outside!” Sora bristled and took on a fighting stance, unwilling to give up the spot beside Rio. Her sense of rivalry seemed to have been triggered.

“W-Wait, there’s no need to fight. This sofa is big enough for three people, so you can each sit on one side of me.” Thankfully, Rio had sat down on a three-seater sofa. Sora was child-sized and Aishia was slender, so there was even enough room for Celia to squeeze in if she wanted. Rio quickly calmed the situation down and sat in the middle of the sofa, making space for Aishia and Sora on each side.

“...” Celia watched the three of them sit down in silence.

Aishia and Sora were both clinging tightly to Rio’s arms. The two of them certainly had enough power to claim those spots—both Aishia and Sora were among the strongest people in the world. But that didn’t mean Celia had accepted defeat. She had no intention of losing to them.

Should I have tried to sit beside him as well? No, we’re here to talk tonight. This spot is fine for now. I want Rio to look at me as well.

Since Rio had shifted to the side to make space for Aishia and Sora, Celia

shifted so she was directly opposite to him.

“I see you’ve picked up another awfully unique individual,” she said to Rio, smiling as though she were completely unbothered.

“So it seems. Things have gotten a lot more lively thanks to her.” Rio glanced at the two at his sides with subtle shyness.

“I see.”

“How were things on your end? Is everyone doing well?”

“Yup... Everyone’s great.”

Everyone lived as though it was natural not to have Rio around. Rio didn’t exist in their memories. Unable to bear how sad she felt about that, Celia looked down and nodded.

“That’s good, then,” Rio said, happy about everyone’s state of peace from the bottom of his heart.

“It’s just... While we were at Rodania, Aki and her brother came to the mansion. Did you tell him about that already?” Celia asked, glancing at Aishia.

“Yes, I’ve heard from Aishia. It doesn’t seem like a problem at present, right? Especially for Miharu and Aki. I heard the two of them made up.”

“Yeah, Miharu and Aki are completely back to normal. Actually, I think Aki’s grown a little more mature now—maybe it’s because she felt guilty towards Miharu, but it seems she’s learned how to maintain an appropriate distance now. She’s not as clingy as she used to be, and she seems much calmer than before. The only problem I can see is in her older brother.”

“Did Takahisa do something?” Rio asked fearfully.

“He hasn’t done anything, but...because he’s forgotten about you, he’s forgotten the things that happened in the past...” Celia said hesitantly. “I think he’s in love with Miharu. No—I’m sure of it.”

She accurately guessed the reason why Takahisa was a potential problem.

“Really? I mean, I suppose that makes sense.”

Takahisa had been so obsessed with Miharu, he had treated Rio like an enemy just for being beside her. Rio knew that Takahisa was in love with her, and he couldn’t imagine those feelings would just disappear for no reason.

“Yes, I can tell by just watching him. But Miharu has no feelings for Takahisa. I know that for sure.”

Celia stared at Rio as though to point out who exactly it was that Miharu loved.

“...” Rio didn’t respond. He either had no self-awareness, or didn’t believe it could be his forgotten self.

“That’s why I believe he could continue to be a potential problem like this,” Celia continued with a weary sigh. “He does seem to have strongly reflected on his actions, so we have no choice but to wait and see for now...”

“I’m sorry my erasure from everyone’s memory has caused you so much stress.”

“It’s not your fault. Let’s work out a way to get everyone to remember you two soon.”

“Yes.”

Although they hadn’t found a way to do that yet, neither Rio nor Aishia were pessimistic about it. They exchanged looks with each other and nodded firmly.

“Sora told me about that mask and Miharu’s past life already.”

“Right.”

“Thank you for saving us at the risk of losing your memories,” Celia said with a saddened expression.

“There’s no need to thank me for that.” Although his memories had been in danger, Rio shook his head gently.

“But—I don’t want you to lose your precious memories of everyone.” Celia expressed her feelings directly to Rio.

“I might be one of the people you’ll forget, right? You won’t forget other transcendent ones and their disciples, but I’m neither of those. I’ve finally remembered you, so please don’t forget me...” Celia protested, staring straight into Rio’s eyes.

“I know. I’m scared of forgetting everyone too.” Rio nodded with a sad smile.

“That’s why you two need to avoid fighting as much as possible from now on. So that that doesn’t happen.”

“I’ll do my best...”

“We’re the ones who have to do our best. Sora said that if we continue relying on you for everything, you’ll use up all your masks in no time at all. I’d like to analyze the mask you gave me to see if it can be replicated. You don’t mind if I keep holding onto it, right?” Celia asked, placing the broken mask down on the table before her. She had brought it with her when leaving the mansion to ask him about it.

“Of course. Its effect continues until it completely breaks apart, so you should be able to analyze it like this, but let me know if you want one in perfect condition.”

“I’ll use this cracked one for now. I was planning on analyzing the mask

tomorrow, but since I'm here... How about I take a look at it now?"

"Can you do that?"

"Yes. I've never used the spell before, but I think it should work."

"Then please do."

"Got it. Okay... *Magicae Explicare.*" Celia took a breath, then held her hand over the mask, reciting the spell. A complicated spell formula appeared at her fingertips, before proceeding to wrap around the mask.

Image-wise, it was a rather plain spectacle. Celia had her hand held out to cast the spell, and the spell was wrapped around the mask.

"Is it really working like that?"

"Yeah. This is amazing... The information is just forcing its way into my head. But it doesn't mean I can understand it perfectly. I'll have to focus quite hard..." Celia's expression was utterly serious.

"That's probably the spell Lina's disciple used! Sora's seen it before! This might actually be promising!" Sora said with a sparkle in her eyes. However...

"From the looks of things, the more complicated the formula, the longer the analysis will take. And the one in this mask is extremely complex..."

Celia had only just begun the analysis, yet there was already a sheen of sweat across her forehead.

"Sorry... I don't think I can analyze it like this."

Unable to endure the flood of information in her head, Celia canceled the analysis spell.

"Are you okay?" Rio stood up and made his way over to her.

"Yup, I'll be fine. Whew..."

With a big sigh, Celia gestured for Rio to sit back down on the sofa.

"You don't have to strain yourself analyzing the mask. It's okay if it can't be replicated." Rio tried to take the mask on the table out of concern for Celia.

"Wait. It's okay." Celia immediately reached out and placed her hand over Rio's.

"But..."

"It's fine. I can just analyze it a little at a time. It may take some time though..."

"I don't mind if it takes time, but..."

It was an ancient magic artifact created by the Wise Gods in order to escape the rules of the true god. Being able to analyze it at all was amazing enough. What Rio was worried about was the burden on Celia.

"It's fine, really. Let me do this." Celia stared at Rio with determination in

her eyes. When Rio's grip loosened, she quickly snatched up the mask.

"Make sure you don't overdo it, no matter what."

"Yup, just leave it to me."

"Thank you." Rio bowed his head deeply.

"That aside, why didn't you cast the magic silently?" Sora suddenly asked.

"Huh? Because magic is cast by reciting the spell, no?" Celia tilted her head curiously.

That was common sense to her. As magic involved the incorporation of spell formulas inside the body, the spellcaster was at constant risk of misfiring the spells inside them. The action of reciting the spell name was a safeguard against that.

"That's a safety measure for ordinary folk, no? Someone who can analyze a Wise God's artifact, who's gained the characteristics of a Wise God's disciples, should easily be able to cast magic without reciting the spell," Sora said, showing how highly she regarded Celia's capability.

"But...how do I do that?"

"Huh? Just do what Sora does." Sora suddenly brought her index finger up to her face, too lazy to explain with words. Then...

"Hmph..." she hummed in thought. A simple spell formula appeared at her fingertip, and a tiny flame appeared with a cute "poof" sound.

"W-Wow! That's amazing!" Celia cried in wonder. Rio was also blinking in surprise.

"That's truly, truly amazing, Sora!" Celia clapped her hands.

"Th-There's no need to praise Sora so much. Tch," Sora grumbled happily.

"How are you doing that, Sora? And how come you use magic instead of spirit arts?"

"Sora uses spirit arts, so she can't use magic. The trick to this is simple: Sora imagined this spell formula in her head and made it appear. That's all. The key is to put the instructions for the phenomenon you want to occur in the spell formula."

"Oh, I see. So you draw the spell formula with spirit arts, then let the magic activate?" As one would expect of a genius sorcerer, Celia was quick to understand what Sora meant.

"Something like that!"

"But doesn't that mean I can't do it? I'm a sorcerer, so I can't use spirit arts with the spells in my body."

Sorcerers used their own body as a magic artifact to store spell formulas. In a

way, this could be considered a form of artificial body modification. By entrusting the spell formula with the instructions necessary to create a phenomenon, the sorcery could be activated simply by reciting the spell name.

However, the price for that was the inability to use spirit arts, which allowed the spellcaster to alter the phenomenon however they imagined. Or least, it should have been...

“But there are two spirit arts that a sorcerer can use: the depiction and manipulation of a spell formula.”

“Hmm. The depiction and manipulation...”

The things Sora was saying were new not only to Celia, but to Rio and Aishia as well. They listened with their eyes widened in interest.

“It’s different from making letters and words appear as light, you know? When activating magic and sorcery, the spell formula that appears as light is referred to as the depiction of a spell formula. Overwriting that depicted formula is referred to as manipulation.”

“Wow.” Celia listened to Sora’s explanation intently, her intellectual curiosity piqued.

“But if you asked Lina, she’d probably say it isn’t technically spirit arts.”

“Because it isn’t technically spirit arts, sorcerers can use it as well. Is that what you mean? I can understand the logic, but why isn’t it considered spirit arts?” Celia tilted her head in thought, recalling the light that appeared when activating sorcery and magic.

Spell formulas took the shape of geometric patterns of letters and symbols. The way casters used their magic essence to make light depict a spell formula was no different from how casters used spirit arts to make a phenomenon occur as they imagined.

“She said something about how a spell formula is the equation to seek a solution for the phenomenon, and not the phenomenon itself. It was pretty complicated...”

Sora looked back on her memories of that time, repeating Lina’s words hesitantly. Frankly speaking, this explanation was somewhat lacking when it came to Celia’s question, but—

“Hmm...” Celia seemed to understand what she meant and hummed in interest.

“It’s also activated differently from regular spirit arts. Regular spirit arts can be activated by releasing a vague idea along with your magic essence and letting the mana interpret the intended phenomenon, but the depiction of a spell formula

cannot be vague. You have to memorize the entire spell formula and store its shape clearly in your brain in order to depict it."

"Huh? Isn't that really difficult? It sounds like it'd be easier for people who can use spirit arts to directly create the phenomenon... And faster for sorcerers to just recite the spell they want to use..." Celia said, pointing out the fatal flaw to the depiction of spell formulas. The higher the grade of sorcery, the more complex the spell formulas were. The spell formula for creating a simple flame would be much less intricate than those of attack magic.

If the spell formula had to be accurately memorized, then there was barely any practical use to it—that's what Celia thought.

"Exactly. It's stupidly troublesome. What Sora created before could be made in an instant with spirit arts. No one normally bothers with such a pointless thing."

Sora readily agreed with the disadvantage Celia pointed out.

"Th-Then what's the use of it...?" Celia asked, somewhat disappointed.

"It's a different case when it comes to the Wise Gods and their disciples. They're mind monsters capable of simultaneous processing and thought acceleration. Higher-grade magic spells are easier to cast with recitation, but regular magic is faster to cast silently. That's why if you're really Lina's disciple... You might have obtained that characteristic as well," Sora said, staring at Celia.

"I see..."

"I've tried writing words with spirit arts before. I did it to test whether I could draw a spell formula as though I were painting a picture, but it seems to require a different approach." Having listened to everything until now, Rio offered his own past experience for comparison.

"As expected of the Dragon King! While simple spell formulas can be drawn with the finger as you just described, the depiction Sora spoke of is indeed different. The spell formula instantly appears out of nowhere, so it's different from drawing with a brush."

"If there's a magic or sorcery we know the spell formula of, maybe we could try it now?" Celia suggested nervously.

"You could!" Sora agreed.

Thus, they began making an attempt at depicting their spell formulas.

"This is pretty hard..." Rio held the index finger of his right hand before his face and glared into empty space. He was imagining a spell formula appearing at his fingertip, but nothing was happening.

Beside him, Aishia was similarly glaring into space. “It feels like something’s about to activate.”

“Right. It’d be easier if I were just making letters appear...”

He attempted to make letters appear and received an instant response. There was definitely something different from activating regular spirit arts.

“Hmm... It does feel different from when I attempt regular spirit arts. This one feels like something even I could do.”

As stated earlier, sorcerers like Celia were unable to use spirit arts. Rio had taught her the technique required for using spirit arts before, so she had the knowledge of how to use them, but the spell formulas inside her body prevented their activation. The instructions to create a phenomenon couldn’t be conveyed to mana, the natural energy of the world.

“He he he. It took Sora a bit of time to learn this as well! But just a bit!” Sora seemed pleased to be given an opportunity to teach Rio something.

“Since I can feel some kind of reaction, I shouldn’t be too far off the mark for the process of depiction. All that’s left is...” Celia had entered her academic mode and was busy muttering away to herself.

“Well, you’ll get the hang of it eventually. What’s most important is to accurately recall the shape of the spell formula, as Sora said earlier...”

Having enjoyed everyone’s reactions to the fullest, Sora felt it was about time she gave some more advice. She opened her mouth with that in mind, when—

“Oh, I did it.” Celia succeeded in making a spell formula appear silently. The spell she was testing was magic for a small source of light which floated lightly in the air.

“And that’s why they call you a genius.”

“That’s amazing, Celia.”

Rio complimented Celia with a look of wonder while Aishia complimented her honestly.

“Wha?! That’s impossible! Even Sora couldn’t do it without more hints!” Sora yelped in shock.

“Is there a trick to it besides memorizing the entire spell formula?”

“Hmm... Memorizing the shape of the formula is important, but it feels very inefficient if you don’t understand the meaning of the shape. Perhaps a deeper understanding of magic or sorcery is better? I tried to remember the feeling of casting the actual magic to create this light source and it just worked.”

“I see...”

“It may be harder for us to understand the feeling of using magic, since we

can only use spirit arts."

Rio and Aishia listened to Celia's explanation. Her theoretical way of thinking and genius mind had probably helped her grasp what she had to do quickly.

"S-Sora was just about to teach you that, Dragon King! The trick to understanding the spell formula goes like this... Umm..." Sora hurriedly tried to take the credit for teaching them.

"You know how spirit arts casters can understand and imitate the sorcery in a magic artifact by touching the artifact and reading the flow of magic essence? Perhaps you could use that feeling as a reference," Celia added in explanation.

"S-Sora was going to say that later! Read the room! Just because you learned to do it a little quickly doesn't give you the right to be cocky about it!" Sora lashed out with tears in her eyes.

"S-Sorry. I just thought this was easier to understand as a sorcerer than a spirit arts caster. It was fun to think about." Celia soothed Sora with a confused look.

"There there, Sora. Aishia and I still don't know how to do it, so can you teach us?"

Placated by Rio's words, Sora nodded happily. "O-Of course!"

"I'll try drawing out a few sorcery spells with simple formulas on paper." With a sigh of relief, Celia stood up to fetch a pen and paper.

Drawing a spell formula on paper with regular ink wouldn't activate the sorcery as long as no magic essence was supplied as fuel. It was the perfect way to practice getting a feel for things.

And so, Rio and Aishia sent their essence into the formula Celia drew to confirm how it should feel. Rio used to use this method to increase the spirit arts he could use when he was in the Royal Academy, so he was quick on the uptake. Aishia had exceptional talent when it came to spirit arts, so she didn't struggle either.

"Thank you very much. Now that I can do it, I see what Sora meant earlier. It's far easier to just activate spirit arts. Having to use a different method of activation makes it hard to pull off quickly, and memorizing each spell formula one by one would be inefficient for Aishia and me. What are your thoughts, Celia?" Rio reached the conclusion that he probably wouldn't use this again in the future, so he turned to Celia for her opinion.

"It's pretty easy for me to use; I like it. I'll have to try it out a bit more, but I think it'd be faster for me to use silent casting up to intermediate-grade magic or

so. It'd be nice to instantly cast magic without reciting the spell name like with spirit arts." As a sorcerer, she felt a certain admiration towards spirit arts. Celia smiled happily at the new power she had gained.

"Lina was able to cast difficult spells silently, so you should do your best too, Celia," Sora said, encouraging her with a hint of embarrassment.

Celia's eyes widened. "Oh my, thank you. And thank you for saying my name," she thanked her cheerfully.

"S-Sora just felt like it. The Dragon King will be troubled if you don't."

Sora turned away, showing Celia her round cheek.

"I'll have to work extra hard then. He he." With an elegant smile, Celia clenched her fists, looking motivated.

"Sora will stay in the mansion for a few more days like this. Please continue teaching Celia during that time, Sora."

"Of course!" Sora replied energetically.

"Have you decided what to do after those few days?" Celia asked.

"Yes. There might be something else that can be done about the rules of god besides the mask. I'm thinking of going on a journey to find more hints about Lina. It might take a few weeks."

"I see. I'll have to analyze what I can in that time." Celia was sad and uneasy to be separated from Rio in such a situation, but she had just decided not to rely on Rio and Aishia so much.

"Once Sora leaves the mansion, Aishia will stay back instead."

Rio had wondered whom to bring between Aishia and Sora, but there was a high chance of encountering traces of other transcendent ones and their disciples on the journey. Sora was the only one who knew them from when they were around, so he decided it would be best to have her accompany him this time.

"Really? It'll be lonely without her around, but it'll be nice to stay with you again, Aishia."

"Yup. I won't be lonely if I can talk to you too."

Celia and Aishia both spoke, then exchanged a look.

"That means Sora gets to be with the Dragon King again!"

"Yeah. I'll be counting on you, Sora."

"Of course!" Sora replied, happy enough to start dancing on the spot.

For the next hour, the four of them enjoyed their time together. The day had started with Rodania being attacked at the crack of dawn, so Celia had to be exhausted by now. Because she couldn't stay for too long, the time to say goodbye arrived in a flash.

“Take care. Please bring her back safely, Sora.”

Rio and Aishia stood at the entrance of the house, seeing Celia and Sora off.

“Of course! Let’s go, Celia.”

Sora attempted to pick Celia up, but before she could, Celia walked up to Rio and called out to him with a look of determination.

“Hey, about the rules of god—I’ll definitely do something about them.”

“Everyone will regain their memories so that you and Aishia can live with us without any grief. Sora can join us, and we can all live together again,” she said, putting her currently impossible wish into words.

“Yes... Definitely.”

“I probably won’t be able to see you off on the day you depart, so I’m going to do it now. Have a safe trip, Rio,” Celia said, hugging Rio tightly.

“Hmph...” Sora took a step forward to separate her from Rio, but she seemed to change her mind after seeing Celia cling to him.

“Tch... Whatever.” She stopped where she was standing. Aishia approached Sora instead.

“How admirable of you, Sora.” She gently patted her head.

“Sh-Shut up. Don’t treat Sora like a child.”

A pleased look briefly flashed across Sora’s face before she quickly brushed away Aishia’s hand with a blush. She then turned to glare at Celia’s back, puffing up her cheeks.

“Hey, Celia! How long are you going to cling to the Dragon King for?! We’re leaving!”

Whether it was to hide her embarrassment or because she had run out of patience, Sora tried to pull Celia off Rio.

Chapter 6: Hero Q&A

The next afternoon, Satsuki, Masato, and Takahisa were led by Charlotte and Lilianna to visit the dining room in the castle. Francois had something to talk to them about, so they were going to have lunch together with him.

“Please come this way.”

A knight opened the door to the dining room and Charlotte gestured for them to enter. When Satsuki and the others entered the room, they found it was already occupied by other visitors: Beltrum’s First Princess Christina and Second Princess Flora, the hero Hiroaki, Roanna, and Duke Huguenot.

“Princess Christina! Princess Flora!” Satsuki ran up to the girls she already considered her good friends. Christina and Flora’s expressions brightened in return. They stood up to greet her.

“Long time no see, Lady Satsuki.”

“It’s an honor to be in your company again.”

Satsuki frowned sadly, unable to find the right words to say. “I heard about what happened in Rodania. You must have suffered a lot.”

“Thank you for your kind words. We were saved by Professor Celia and Sara’s group, so please give them our regards later,” Christina said. Flora bowed her head beside her.

“We’ll invite you two to the mansion on another occasion, so please come visit again,” Charlotte said, joining the conversation.

“We’d be glad to.”

“Of course.”

The siblings replied over each other.

“It’s nice to see you again too, Hiroaki. I’m glad to see you’re unharmed.” Satsuki sat down nearby and looked over at Hiroaki. While the relationship between them wasn’t the worst, it wasn’t exactly good either. Neither of them normally bothered to talk to the other when they had nothing to say. In situations like this, Satsuki was the one who usually greeted him first, only to be met with a displeased face.

“Yeah. Thanks.” Hiroaki glanced over at Satsuki without getting up from his seat. His reply was curt, but it wasn’t hostile. Satsuki’s eyes widened faintly at

that.

“Good afternoon, Sakata. Do you remember me? I greeted you once at the banquet.”

Takahisa approached Hiroaki to give his greetings as well.

“You’re... Right, you’re the hero from Centostella. So that little one over there must be the new hero.”

Hiroaki seemed to remember Takahisa.

“Hello, I’m Sendo Masato.”

“Sakata Hiroaki,” Hiroaki replied with a light shrug.

“Everyone. My father will be arriving soon, so please take your seats,” Charlotte called out to everyone, having received a signal from the knight beside the door who was tasked with announcing arrivals. As Satsuki and the others all took their seats, Galarc’s King Francois entered the dining room.

“Thank you for gathering today, everyone—please take your seats. There are some topics on the agenda that are unsuitable for a meal, so let us all enjoy the food first.”

As soon as Francois was done speaking, food was carried into the room. Thus began the lunch party with four heroes, but the atmosphere in the room was far from bright. Everyone was eating their meal—if anything, the meal was what kept their mouths occupied from speaking. Then, once everyone was finally done eating...

“Now, let us get to business. The reason why I have gathered the heroes here today is none other than to discuss the fall of Rodania. Lady Satsuki would have heard about this already, but it has been reported that the hero of ice assisted the Beltrum Kingdom in the attack on Rodania,” Francois began, looking around at everyone’s faces.

“The problem is the power that the ice hero displayed. In a single blow, the hero of ice froze a hundred-odd Aerial Knights protecting Rodania, making them fall from the skies,” he continued.

“...”

Faces stiffened as the group felt some form of nervousness.

“This number cannot be dismissed lightly. The hero was facing a flying army spread throughout the air, yet still managed such devastation. Princess Christina estimates that if he had used that power against an army on the ground, he could have taken out over a thousand soldiers.”

“A-A thousand?!”

Everyone besides Satsuki, Masato, and Takahisa—who had already heard

this earlier—was lost for words at that number.

“If that power could only be used once per battle, then the nation would merely consider it a severe threat that cannot be overlooked. However, if that power could be used multiple times, or if an even greater power existed... We could potentially be facing a national crisis.”

“What do you mean by potentially?” Satsuki asked nervously.

“I am referring to the potential of a hero deciding to use their power against us. Heroes possess the power to kill a thousand soldiers in a single move. If such a power could be used repeatedly, mobilizing the army would just be sacrificing lives for nothing.” Francois pointed out the danger of the heroes outright.

“Wh-What are you saying?! We’d never do that!” Takahisa must have felt as though he had been criticized for being a hero, so he stood up and yelled at Francois in protest.

“Of course, I believe that no one of a sound mind would do such a thing. I have trust in all the heroes here today,” Francois replied calmly.

“Please return to your seat, Sir Takahisa.”

Pacified by Lilianna’s quiet words, Takahisa sat back down with a bitter look.

“I must emphasize this to avoid any misunderstandings: I do not see the heroes present here as a threat. I view the hero of ice, who intentionally used his power in the conflict of another nation, as the threat. I ask for your understanding of that before I continue,” Francois said, carefully looking each hero in the eye.

“It’s okay, I understand,” Satsuki said.

“Me too,” Masato replied.

“Hmm...” Hiroaki shrugged to convey his understanding without any words.

“...Right.” Takahisa nodded.

“As the leader of this kingdom, I wish for a means to estimate the power of the hero of ice. Obviously, the ice hero cannot be contacted directly. That is why I have gathered the heroes that are friendly with our kingdom here today. I have already explained this to Sir Hiroaki, but I would like to ask you all to show us your strongest move,” Francois said, finally explaining the true reason for the lunch party.

“Does that mean that Sakata...” Satsuki looked at Hiroaki.

“Yeah, I’ve agreed to cooperate. The ice hero on the enemy side is a problem for the Restoration as well. Which makes it my problem.” Hiroaki’s statement showed a strong sense of responsibility towards the Restoration.

“Huh...” Satsuki gazed at him curiously, seeing him in a new light.

“I would also like to emphasize that this is a request. You are by no means forced to participate. Refusing won’t lead to any hardships or loss on your part either. I am willing to wait if you wish to take a few days and consider your answer, and I am open to answering any of your questions,” Francois said to the heroes.

“Then...I’d like to ask something.”

Satsuki slowly raised her hand.

“What is it, Lady Satsuki?”

“Regarding the power of a hero... As the hero of the Galarc Kingdom, you could have measured my power at any time you wanted. Isn’t that right?”

“With your agreement, yes.”

“But you never asked me for permission. You’ve never even asked me to demonstrate my hero power. I think we’ve discussed something similar before, but why is that? Could you explain once more, in front of all the heroes here?” Satsuki looked around at the other heroes as she spoke.

“Indeed, I could have asked you to demonstrate your power to prove yourself a hero. But it was clear from the situation at the time that you matched the legends of the heroes...” Francois said, chuckling as though something was amusing.

“There were a number of reasons why I didn’t ask, but the main reason is that I consider the heroes to be of equal status to the rulers of a nation. I wanted to form a good relationship from the beginning, so I didn’t want to make any demands I wouldn’t have wanted made of me. As is natural when interacting with someone of equal status,” he added in explanation.

“...” Satsuki silently waited for Francois to continue.

“Would you not find it improper? How much force you have doesn’t matter. There’s no political, financial, or other necessity for a demonstration. Asking you to show off your power out of pure curiosity would be boorish, wouldn’t you agree?”

“I get what you’re saying, but was there really no necessity?”

The powers of a hero should have had plenty of military use for the kingdom. Satsuki asked why Francois didn’t have any interest in a roundabout way.

“The Galarc Kingdom is prosperous. There’s no war ongoing, and the kingdom is not at risk of ruin. We have no intention of invading anyone else. What would we do with a legendary power during such peaceful times? Although I will admit I had some curiosity towards the power,” Francois said

honestly.

"If you were curious, why didn't you investigate it?" Takahisa asked from the side.

"As I said already, because that would be improper. And, as I also said, because I wished to form an equal relationship with Lady Satsuki. It's easy to be repulsed by people who act improperly with you, no?" Having an interest in something didn't automatically mean it was necessary to investigate, was Francois's thinking.

Takahisa continued to stare at Francois skeptically as though to say, "You say that, but you still wanted to investigate it," but Francois was unaffected by his rude gaze.

"It would be one thing if Lady Satsuki volunteered to test her power herself, but I would never make such a request of her out of curiosity alone. At worst, Lady Satsuki could become wary of me. Even if there had been a necessity for the power to be investigated, I would have made the request after a certain amount of trust had been established first. And that is why I am here now," Francois stated openly. He then looked at the heroes. "There's another thing I wish to ask all of you."

"Yes?" Satsuki replied on behalf of everyone.

"I have only witnessed Lady Satsuki's behavior up close, but when it comes to the true power of the heroes, would I be wrong to say that the rest of you haven't investigated the full potential of your powers either? It seems to me like even if you had the opportunity to release all your power, none of you would ever try to test your limits and desire even more power," Francois said.

"That's because I have no intention of using it!" Takahisa answered first, expressing his strong sense of morals.

"I am in agreement with Takahisa there. I never planned on using it either."

"Same here."

Although they were less heated in their replies, Satsuki and Masato agreed with him.

"Well, yeah. The moment we get a little serious, we can produce a devastating attack. It's not like we *want* to throw ourselves into war, so what are we gonna crave further power for? The power itself is completely intuitive, so it's not like there's an instruction manual either." Hiroaki agreed with the three of them while giving his own opinion.

"If I could add one thing, then I was also worried *you'd* be wary of *me* if I asked to find out more about my hero power. It wasn't that I had no interest in

the power of a hero, but I thought it'd be a problem if I displayed my power too much," Satsuki said, adding a different perspective.

"Bwa ha ha! I do appreciate that thoughtful side of you, Lady Satsuki." Francois laughed heartily.

"I appreciate you for being a thoughtful king too, Your Majesty."

"Then let us speak more frankly with each other. I will be honest with you—I feared what would happen to the kingdom if someone with exceptional power appeared. If you didn't want to use the true power of a hero, then it was more convenient for the kingdom if you kept that power sealed. The Galarc Kingdom was under stable rule before the presence of a hero, so there was no need to use that legendary power—just borrowing your influence was enough," Francois said, revealing his true feelings.

Things may have been different if the power of the hero were controlled by Francois's will, but the ones that possessed the power were heroes of equal status to the king. The free will of a single girl was different from the will of a nation's king.

As the ruler of the kingdom, it was only natural to fear a power that couldn't be controlled, one great enough to destroy the kingdom. In modern Earth, it was the equivalent of an individual possessing a nuclear weapon instead of a nation.

"If we cooperate with the kingdom on this... We might be found to have as much power as the hero of ice, right?" Satsuki suddenly asked.

"Indeed."

"Would we not be considered a threat afterwards? Won't you be wary that we'll turn our power against the kingdom? I'm sure it's frightening for the kingdom to have an individual with so much power."

Considering the massacre the ice hero Renji had committed, it was already proved that the powers of the heroes were a threat. Satsuki took that into account as she questioned Francois earnestly.

"Whether you are seen as a threat or not will depend on the level of trust we have. In your case, I've had plenty of time to confirm your character from the moment you were summoned until now. That's why I decided to trust you and make the request for you to test your hero power to your heart's content. This is the answer I have reached." Francois stared directly into Satsuki's eyes as he answered her.

"Since Your Majesty has gone about this in such a courteous way, I'm in. As the hero of the Galarc Kingdom, I vow to display the full extent of my powers," Satsuki said, promising her cooperation.

“Are you sure? As I said before, I am not seeking an immediate answer.”

“I have similar trust in you as the king. I also consider Char to be an irreplaceable friend. With people like you in charge of Galarc, I’m happy to give my answer here and now.”

“I see... Thank you,” Francois said, giving Satsuki an appreciative look.

“H-Hold on a minute, Satsuki. Isn’t that a bit rash of you? You should think a bit more before giving your answer,” Takahisa said hurriedly.

“Takahisa...”

“What if his request doesn’t end at displaying your power? What if the situation changes and he asks you to *use* that power? If we use our power in a war, we’ll end up killing a huge amount of people. Isn’t that right?”

Instead of looking at Satsuki, Takahisa shot Francois an accusatory glare.

“If the hero of ice ever threatens our kingdom with his power, I may ask Lady Satsuki to stand at the forefront as a deterrent. However, it will purely be as a deterrent. I would only ask her to use her power against the enemy army as the very, very last resort. And even then, I would yield the final decision to Lady Satsuki herself. I have absolutely no intention of using the power of a hero as an aggressor. My focus is purely defensive, to use the power as a deterrent.” In return, Francois answered while looking at Satsuki instead of Takahisa.

“You’re saying you won’t use the power of a hero for war?”

“That phrasing implies that I won’t use heroes for war at all. What I said is that I wish to use their power as a deterrent,” Francois immediately corrected.

“There’s no guarantee you’ll stop at just a deterrent, though,” Takahisa muttered with a frown. He wasn’t as inclined to believe in Francois as Satsuki, which was probably why it seemed that she was being deceived in his eyes.

While there was a trusting relationship between Satsuki and Francois, the same couldn’t be said for Takahisa and Francois. Takahisa was summoned in the Centostella Kingdom, so there was nothing that could have been done about that, but...

“That may be true. But I have already conveyed my policy towards the enemy military. You seem to be under the impression that the kingdom is actively seeking to participate in war, Sir Takahisa. While there are indeed some nations that exert their energy in war, it all comes down to the leader—and I can promise you that I do not enjoy war. There are times where I have no choice but to consider it as a means of diplomacy, but I would never do so willingly,” Francois said after a small sigh.

“Why is that?” Takahisa continued voicing his doubts.

“First of all... While I wouldn’t go as far as to call it pointless, the economic cost is far too heavy. Mobilizing the army costs a massive amount of resources. Weapons have to be forged, citizens enlisted, food sourced, troops dispatched, supplies transported... There are too many things to enumerate,” Francois explained as his first hesitation.

“Although it can depend on the scale, war is a burden on the entire kingdom. It also causes the citizens to accumulate stress. Yet victory brings very little compensation. The discontent throughout the nation remains after the war, so the aftermath of war brings more than just an economic cost,” he continued, offering the perspective of the citizens that were forced into war.

“People aren’t thoughtless pawns. Once victory is achieved, rewards for great merits and compensation for damages will be an inevitable topic. Every decision made will be met with criticism and accusations, building more discontent. And those who contributed the most to the victory will gain the power to create new factions.” With a tired face, he added his final point as a finishing blow.

“I don’t know about other kings, but I would require the circumstances to outweigh those demerits before I would willingly seek out war myself. That, or for the circumstances to have very little demerits in the first place. Well, I suppose the power of the heroes could be forcefully used in that regard.”

“Wait, then...!” Takahisa started to speak, but—

“Just because I can, doesn’t mean I will. I wouldn’t do that,” Francois declared first.

“Why...?”

“Like I said already, my focus is purely defensive, to use the power as a deterrent. I also said that I wish to form a good relationship with Lady Satsuki. Even if the heroes truly have the power to ruin a nation, that doesn’t mean they actively wish for destruction, no?” Francois said, calmly dissecting the argument point by point.

“An individual can be tormented by too much power in their hands. Doing this would be like entrusting the deterrent force of a kingdom to a single person. Lady Satsuki’s mental burden has to be taken into consideration as well. I wish to emphasize that I will not force her into doing anything,” Francois said, looking at Satsuki pointedly.

“That’s enough, Takahisa. I know you’re worried for me, but my answer won’t change.” Satsuki tried to soothe him with a sigh.

“But...”

“I trust the Galarc Kingdom under King Francois’s reign. If the hero of ice

threatens this kingdom, I can't turn a blind eye either way," she stated clearly to Takahisa's reluctance.

"So you'd fight that ice hero if he attacked?"

"That's right... If I felt like I had no other choice, I would."

"Why?" Takahisa asked, unable to understand her.

"Because it's my problem too. If the hero of ice overpowers the military, the enemy will march upon this castle."

"Sure, it might affect you—but that isn't a reason for us to fight as well."

"So you wouldn't fight if the Centostella Castle were being invaded?"

"Making extreme hypotheticals just derails the point..."

"It'll be too late when that hypothetical becomes proven, and I don't think it's that extreme either. The hero of ice has a track record of attacking Rodania. Many people died, and Christina and the others had to flee for their lives."

Satsuki glanced at the group from the Restoration as she made her argument.

"But if you keep going down that path, in the end, you'll be using your power against other people. If we use our power, people will die. They'll drop like flies. I don't want that. Killing someone just for threatening you is plain barbaric..." Takahisa became emotional and argued back with clear disgust in his tone.

"I see. You don't wish to fight because you don't want to kill people."

"Isn't that only natural?"

"Right, natural. I don't want to kill anyone either. I don't enjoy fighting. But if I don't protect myself, who will protect me? We can't live in peace if we don't protect ourselves."

"That doesn't mean you can kill people for it. Peace is meaningless if you have to commit crimes to obtain it. Trying to fight power with power will only result in more lives sacrificed. If both sides refuse to yield an inch, the fight can only end when one side is completely destroyed."

"What you're saying sounds far more extreme to me... And personally, I don't believe peace can exist without power. There needs to be a power in place to act as a deterrent to keep people from killing each other."

Neither Satsuki nor Takahisa would budge on their stances. Until...

"So, hero from Centostella."

Hiroaki, who had been observing them silently until then, interrupted in an irritated tone.

"Are you talking to me?" Takahisa tilted his head with a dubious look.

"Yeah, you. Say there were ten people in a room with ten weapons. One of those people is you. Now, six of those people are good people and friendly with

you. But the remaining three are assholes. They pick up weapons and threaten the rest of you. What would you do?”

Hiroaki suddenly questioned Takahisa with a made-up situation.

“What? Again with the unrealistic hypotheticals?” Takahisa frowned.

“Just answer,” Hiroaki insisted.

“The law exists for a reason. I shouldn’t have to do anything, because no normal person would commit such a violent crime.”

“Unfortunately, there are idiots in this world that ignore the law. If people like that pick up weapons to threaten you, what would you do?”

“I’d negotiate with them before it reached that point and leave the room.”

“What if the three people with weapons said no, they’re not letting you get away?”

“I’d convince them,” Takahisa replied without hesitation.

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“And if you failed?”

“I won’t give up. I’ll make sure they listen.”

“...Are you serious? You’d probably be killed for being annoying at that point. I guess if you don’t want to put up a fight, then it’s your life... But what if the chick you loved was in there and those armed guys were trying to feel her up? Would you still try to talk things through? Satsuki and King Francois are saying they wouldn’t let those guys have their way. They’d pick up the weapons to protect those dear to them. And I’m in agreement with them.”

“Escalating the situation until people kill each other is exactly the kind of meaningless sacrifice I’m talking about. Picking up weapons to avoid fighting is contradictory and absurd... There has to be another option other than fighting!”

“That’s why to avoid unnecessary sacrifice, we... It’s no good. This guy has no sense of reality. Are you sure he isn’t just some coward that doesn’t want to dirty his own hands?”

Hiroaki sighed heavily as his frustration pent up while he spoke.

“Wh-What do you mean by that? You people are the ones who aren’t looking at reality. You’re treating people’s lives like nothing. You don’t see people as people!” Takahisa said angrily.

“That’s just your opinion. And all I did was give my opinion. Say, can we just exclude this guy due to a difference in values, King Francois?” Not wanting to talk to Takahisa any further, Hiroaki turned to Francois.

“I was never going to force anyone into participating in the first place,” Francois replied with a shrug. “The need to measure the power of a hero came up, so I made the request to those of you who wish to cooperate. Everything about deterrent forces and so on is irrelevant to the present. There’s no need to decide those things at this very moment. Sir Takahisa is the hero of Centostella —do you have any opinion to offer, Princess Lilianna?” he asked, seeking Lilianna’s thoughts.

“I am not in a position to force Sir Takahisa’s hand either.”

Until now, Lilianna had been watching over the discussions in silence. There was nothing that could be read of her emotions from her expression. But Takahisa seemed to sense something, as he shut his mouth after one glance at her beautiful eyes.

“I see...” Francois uttered with a sigh.

“Then it’s decided. Satsuki and I will participate. What about you, new hero?” Having lost interest in Takahisa, Hiroaki turned to Masato.

“I will cooperate too,” Masato accepted readily.

“H-Hey, Masato!” Takahisa couldn’t overlook Masato’s answer.

“What? You have no right to be giving me orders, bro. After listening to everything you all discussed, I’ve decided I’m in agreement with Satsuki,” Masato replied boldly.

“Do you even understand the situation?! You might end up killing someone!”

“That wasn’t the point. We’re talking about how to deal with the ice hero if he decides to attack more nations. If you have no intention of fighting, then just sit there and shut up. Criticizing the people fighting for you while you hide in the safety zone is what a coward would do.”

“I-I have the right to freedom of speech. And I don’t want to hear that from you either, Masato. Are you saying people who participate in war are superior? That kind of thinking leads to totalitarianism.”

“I don’t get what you’re saying. I’m not talking about who’s superior or whatever that totali-thing is. I’m talking about defending against an attacker. If things will end in fighting either way, then I want to be able to resist before that happens,” Masato replied, heating up the argument between the two brothers.

“Huh. Hey, Satsuki?” Hiroaki called out to Satsuki beside him.

“...Yes?”

“Are they brothers?”

“Yes, they are. The older brother is Sendo Takahisa, and the younger brother is Sendo Masato,” Satsuki said, introducing the two of them.

“Wow, so the younger one’s got a better head on his shoulders.” Hiroaki sneered without bothering to lower his voice.

“Wha...” Takahisa frowned at him, offended by his words.

“Pretty boy hero, what you’re doing is totalitarianism itself, you know? You’re trying to force Satsuki and Masato into sharing your opinion, right?”

“What... That’s not it! All I want is—”

“Neither Satsuki nor Masato are ordering you to fight, you realize?” Hiroaki jeered.

“Guh...” Takahisa gritted his teeth and clenched his fists bitterly.

Realizing that any more of this would just be a squabble, Satsuki interrupted as mediation. “Okay, how about we stop there? The topic this time is whether we’ll help with the investigation into the maximum output of our hero powers. Sakata, Masato, and I will cooperate. Takahisa doesn’t have to do anything he doesn’t want to do. We were told there’s no penalty for not participating, and I think we’ve discussed our respective views enough now.”

“Right. I don’t care whether that guy participates or not anyway. I have no

interest in talking him into it," Hiroaki agreed, backing down easily.

"I'm—I'm not wrong..." Takahisa muttered with a sullen look.

"Then we shall proceed with Sir Hiroaki, Lady Satsuki, and Sir Masato as participants. It'd be troublesome if the nobles in the castle caught word of the investigation and created a fuss, so it will be conducted in secret somewhere away from the public eye. I am still in the midst of selecting an appropriate location, but assume that the experiment will be conducted within the next few days."

With Francois's conclusion, the question-and-answer session between the heroes came to an end.

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Meanwhile, in the mansion where Miharu and the others lived...

After seeing Roland off in the morning when he departed for the Beltrum Kingdom, Celia got straight to analyzing the mask. Even after eating lunch, she shut herself in her room and continued casting magic on the mask on her desk. Sora watched her from where she sat on the bed.

"Celia, thirty seconds have passed since you began analyzing," Sora said to Celia's back.

"Okay. Phew..." Celia stopped her analysis and sighed heavily.

"It's time for the one-hour break between every analysis," Sora urged.

"I'm starting to get used to it, so I think we can start shortening the length of the breaks."

"No. You have to keep this pace for the time being so that Sora can monitor your health. We will lengthen the breaks if your fatigue is accumulating," Sora said, managing Celia's health strictly.

"That's rather protective of you. I expected you to rush me more." Celia chuckled, giving Sora a look of surprise.

"The Dragon King asked Sora to ensure you weren't pushing yourself too hard. Besides, the progress will be even more delayed if you collapse midanalysis. That would be even more bothersome."

"I see... Then I'll take that break now." Celia smiled, pleased to hear she was being valued so much. She got up from her seat and flopped face-first into her bed, burying her face in her cushions.

"So how was it? Have you started to understand it yet?" Sora asked.

"You ask that every break. My answer's the same as before—I've still got a long way to go," Celia replied, rolling over onto her back with a giggle.

“Well, it is an artifact created by one of the so-called Wise Gods. We knew it wouldn’t be easy to analyze from the start.”

“From the feel of things, I’ll need to analyze for a few days to make any progress. I don’t want to take weeks, months, or years doing it, so I’m going to aim for some kind of result before you have to leave with Rio on his journey. Better hope that it works.”

“Well, Sora can spare a brief prayer for you.”

“Hee hee. Thanks.” Celia’s mouth turned upwards in a smile directed at the ceiling. Just then, someone knocked on the door.

“I wonder who that is? I’m coming!” she called out, hurrying over to the door.

“Oh! Hello Suzune.”

Latifa was standing on the other side. “Hi Celia. Sora.” She shot them a friendly grin.

“What’s up, Suzune?”

“Satsuki came home just now, so I wanted to invite you both to tea with everyone in the dining room.”

“That sounds nice. I was just in the middle of a break anyway. What do you think, Sora?” Celia asked, looking over at Sora enthusiastically.

“Tea? What’s so fun about huddling in a room together to drink tea?” Sora looked dubious at the idea of something so annoying.

“I-It’s fun! You can drink delicious tea with someone else and hold a friendly conversation.” As someone who loved her tea time, Celia couldn’t overlook a response like that.

“That’s right!” Latifa agreed. “We all made sweets together! They taste really good too!” she added in support.

“Sweets? There are sweets as well?” Sora’s eyes widened in interest.

“There are! We made lots!”

“Lots of sweets? Well then. Let’s go, Celia.”

“Goodness...” Celia laughed, exasperated at how easily Sora had been lured by the promise of sweets.

“Wh-What is that look for? Research requires a lot of thinking, so it’s important to keep your sugar levels up. Sora’s just concerned for you, Celia.”

Sora made sure to emphasize that the sweets weren’t for herself.

“All right, I get it. Let’s get going.”

Celia giggled, exiting the room. Sora followed her until they reached the dining room where everyone was gathered.

“I brought Celia and Sora over!” Latifa reported to the room at large. Gathered in the room already were the familiar faces of Miharu, Aki, Satsuki, Masato, Sara, Orphia, Alma, Sayo, Komomo, and Charlotte.

“Welcome back, Lady Satsuki and Masato,” Celia said to the two who had just returned. She immediately noticed how Takahisa and Lilianna were absent, but she chose not to mention that.

“We’re home, Celia. And Sora too.”

“Hello.”

Satsuki and Masato greeted her back.

“And when will you stop referring to me with a title like you do to everyone else?” Satsuki pouted sullenly.

“Not this again, aha ha... It’s just a hard line for me to cross, considering our positions...”

Satsuki had asked Celia to change the way she referred to her many times now. Celia had tried so before, but she had to return to using a title the moment they were in public, which naturally led to her using that form of address in their daily life too.

“But you still call Masato by his name after he became a hero.”

Satsuki normally didn’t care about that, so she must have felt jealous after hearing Masato being called by his name after becoming a hero.

“That’s true. I’ll have to call him Sir Masato from now on.”

He had been just a regular boy to her before, but now he was a hero like Satsuki. Becoming a hero didn’t change how she felt about him, but she did have to refer to him by a title in public from now on. However...

“Please don’t call me that, Celia!” Masato protested strongly.

“But I can’t address a hero without a title in public...” Celia said hesitantly. She had to keep in mind her status as a noble.

“What if you just called them by their names at home?” Charlotte suggested. “It’s not like anyone’s watching, and that’s what Lady Satsuki and Sir Masato prefer.”

“But you address everyone with a title yourself, Princess Charlotte.”

“I address everyone equally, so the way I refer to people isn’t an indicator of our closeness. Although there are exceptions like Liselotte. But thanks to that, no one has ever said, ‘You call this person by their name, so why don’t you call me by just my name too?’ to me.” Charlotte grinned.

“Good point... You’ve really thought this through. I guess that’s Char for you,” Satsuki mumbled with strong admiration.

“And there are ways to express familiarity besides changing the way you address someone. Like how I show my true self in front of everyone here.”

“H-How calculating... But I’m honestly happy to hear that.”

“Thank you very much. I love everyone here, you know?” Charlotte said with a mischievous expression.

“Of course, of course.” Satsuki nodded bashfully.

“In noble society, every person has a rank. It can be difficult to navigate around addressing everyone differently, which is why I find it easier to address everyone in the same way. However...” Charlotte paused. “A difference in address doesn’t necessarily mean a difference in familiarity. I don’t think Lady Celia considers Lady Satsuki to be any less of a friend when she addresses her with a title,” she continued.

“Th-That’s exactly right, Princess Charlotte. You have a wonderful way with words.” Celia nodded to show her agreement. “And so, if I could continue to refer to Lady Satsuki in this way...”

“No. That is a different matter to this. What’s wrong with using names at home? Besides, it’s fun to watch Lady Celia so troubled by it,” Charlotte said, obstructing Celia’s attempt to maintain her form of address with a smile.

“You just said something good, so don’t go ruining it like that...” Satsuki sighed, covering her eyes with her right hand. But there was a smile on her face at how typical that was for Charlotte.

“What is there to fuss about when it comes to how to call someone? Weirdos. More importantly, it’s time for sweets. Where are they? Sora came to eat sweets.” Sora had been watching their exchange curiously until now, but her attention moved on to sweets.

“Over here, Sora.”

“H-Hey. Don’t pull, Sora! Gosh.”

Latifa took Sora’s hand and led her over to the largest table in the dining room, seating themselves down beside each other.

“He he. We made lots of sweets just for you, Sora,” Miharu said, pushing over a serving card loaded with trays of sweets.

“Hmph. Ayase Miharu...”

When Sora noticed Miharu approach her seat, she warily eyed her like a stray cat on high alert.

“Y-Yup, that’s me. Why do you call me by my full name?”

“Because,” Sora said bluntly, ignoring Miharu’s confusion.

“You don’t have to call me by my full name, you know? Just Miharu is fine.”

“Huh?! That’s unfair, Miharu! Hey Sora, you can call me Suzune as well, okay?”

Miharu and Latifa said, encouraging Sora to say their names.

“Oh! And I’m Komomo!”

“You can call me Sayo too.”

“In that case, you can call me Orphia.”

Everyone nearby started introducing themselves as well.

“H-Hah? What’s up with all of you, swarming Sora so suddenly...” Sora looked around at their friendly faces. “Wh-Why does Sora have to call your names? Sora doesn’t care about that, she’s here to eat sweets! Sweets!” she yelped to hide her embarrassment.

When she saw how Sora was being surrounded by everyone, Celia giggled in amusement. “Oh my, how lovely. It’s nice to see you getting along with everyone, Sora.”

“Sora is not! Hmph!” Sora puffed up her cheeks.

“He he. Here’s some sweets, Sora,” Miharu said, placing a tray down before her.

“Whoa! There’s a sweet scent coming from it! It looks good! What’s it called?” Sora asked, eyes sparkling.

“There are cookies, madeleines, and scones. You have to add a bit of honey and cream for the scones to be sweet.”

“Can Sora eat already? Sora’s going to eat now.”

“Sure. Eat up.”

Once Miharu passed the trays to the others, she sat down beside Sora.

“Whoa! These cookies are so good!” Sora tossed cookie after cookie into her mouth, munching as though they were the most delicious sweets she had ever eaten.

“Thank goodness.” There was no better reaction to receive for one’s homemade cooking. Miharu smiled happily.

“These cookies are Miharu’s original recipe,” Latifa said from beside Sora.

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“Ayase Miharu’s own recipe? Hmm... Nom nom.”

Sora glared at the cookies with a conflicted expression. But the cookies themselves hadn’t wronged her, so she continued munching away.

“Your throat will feel dry after eating so many cookies. Here, have some milk.”

Instead of tea, Miharu poured some milk into a cup and offered it to Sora.

“Milk? Oh, cow milk. Does that go well with cookies?”

Sora tilted her head skeptically. But her throat was indeed feeling dry, so she took a sip from the cup.

“*Glug, glug*... Whoa, they go perfectly together!” she shouted happily, drinking the rest in one gulp.

“It’s like I’ve got a new little sister,” Latifa said with a carefree smile, gazing at Sora’s face from the side.

“Right. Is this what it’s like to have a little sister? I think I can understand how Miharu feels now,” Aki agreed. She was also watching Sora from the seat across from her.

In fact, everyone in the room was watching Sora stuff her face with sweets with pleasant expressions on their face.

“Wh-What is it? Stop staring at Sora.” Sora glared back at them with a ring of milk around her mouth. As someone who had lived alone until now, she felt uncomfortable being at the center of attention. She couldn’t understand why every single person here was looking at her with a friendly gaze.

“Sorry Sora, you’re just so cute. And you’ve got milk around your mouth, here.” Miharu picked up a damp cloth and gently wiped Sora’s mouth for her.

“W-Wah! What are you doing, Ayase Miharu?! Don’t treat Sora like a child!”

Sora tried to brush away Miharu’s cloth, but Miharu promptly finished wiping Sora’s mouth with a skilled hand.

“Oh, she called Miharu by her full name again,” Latifa pointed out enviously.

“It’s not that strange. Sora calls other people by their names too. Like Celia,” Sora mumbled in embarrassment.

“He he.” Celia sipped her tea from a seat a slight distance away, beaming happily.

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The tea party came to an end an hour later. Stuffed full of sweets, Sora returned to her room alone.

Celia had been summoned by Charlotte to assist with something. Satsuki, Masato, Sara, Orphia, Alma, and Gouki were with her for the same reason. The others were going to remain in the dining room and continue chatting, but Sora hurriedly excused herself by saying she was tired.

“Honestly...what’s with all of them?” she mumbled to herself as she sat down on her bed. Everyone kept trying to talk to her out of curiosity the entire time, making the air extremely suffocating. If the sweets hadn’t tasted so good, she would have left in a huff much earlier.

So why was it? When she looked back on the tea party, she seemed to feel an emotion besides irritation. But she wasn’t able to verbalize that emotion successfully.

“Hrmm...”

The hazy feeling accumulated within Sora with nowhere to go.

“I’m back, Sora. I’m coming in.” Just then, Celia opened the door and entered the room.

“Oh, you’re finally back.” Sora jumped up from the bed and pointed at Celia. She hadn’t been waiting for Celia or anything, so why did she feel happy? Her heart was beating faster for some reason.

“What? It’s only been thirty minutes since you returned to the room first. Were you waiting for me?” Celia looked up at the clock in surprise.

“N-No, Sora wasn’t. What were you talking about?” Sora diverted the topic in embarrassment.

“Oh, I was asked to be a witness to something. It’s confidential to the residents of the mansion, but it’s something Rio should know about, so I was going to talk to you about it...”

“Hmm. Then let’s wait until Aishia comes to check up on us, so you can tell us all together.”

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That night, in the forest outskirts of Galtuuk and at the entrance of the stone house set up beside the spring...

“I’m here again...”

Celia stood facing Rio with a somewhat awkward, somewhat embarrassed expression. She fidgeted restlessly as she avoided Rio’s gaze with a blush.

She had just clung to him boldly the night before to say goodbye, thinking she wouldn’t be able to see him off when he departed for his trip in a few days. Vivid memories of the moment resurfaced in her mind, and the embarrassment

was more than she could bear. Despite that, her joy over seeing Rio again surpassed that, which was why she was standing here again tonight. She was a young lady in love.

“I brought her here again,” Aishia stated in her usual tone.

“We’re back, Dragon King!” Sora greeted Rio happily, delighted to be in his presence again.

“Welcome back, Sora,” Rio replied gently. He then turned to Celia. “And welcome, Celia. Thanks for bringing them here, Aishia.”

“S-Sorry, I didn’t think I’d come two days in a row,” Celia apologized, her face slightly flushed.

“I feel like I said this yesterday, but please don’t apologize. There are no days where you’re not allowed to visit, so I’m really happy to see you again today. Really.”

While it did create a risk of being seen when they moved to and from the mansion, Aishia and Sora were the ones handling transport. They were extremely careful in that regard.

“There’s something I’d like to report to you. Are you available to talk for a bit?” Celia asked, looking up at Rio’s face.

“Of course. Let’s move to the living room.”

Thus, the group relocated to the living room just like the day before, sitting in the exact same seat order. There, Celia explained to Rio about the experiment Charlotte had asked her to witness.

“I see. An investigation into the strength of a hero’s power...” Rio placed a hand against his chin in thought.

“There’s no chance of something like the beast of the land appearing and losing control, right? I have no idea what to do if that happens...” Celia mumbled nervously.

“It isn’t impossible, but I don’t think anyone will lose control of their power. Nor do I think a monster like Saint Erica’s beast will appear either,” Rio said vaguely, choosing his words carefully.

“Really?”

“The Divine Arms that the heroes possess have transcendent ones—upper high rank spirits—dwelling within them. And the upper high rank spirits’ relationship with the Seven Wise Gods is, well...”

“Ah, right. Sora told me all about Miharu and Lina yesterday and today. She also explained the reason why the Divine War happened... I also heard from her how the Six Wise Gods sealed the six upper high rank spirits inside the Divine

Arms, and how the heroes can die when they use that transcendent power."

"In that case, I'll omit the explanation surrounding that. The Six Wise Gods placed a limiter on the Divine Arms so that the upper high rank spirits sealed within can't appear."

"So they won't lose control of that power?"

"Yes. Every hero uses their Divine Arms as a catalyst to form a special contract called a spirit bond with the upper high rank spirits within. Control of the Divine Arms should be in the hands of the hero, but if they output too much power, the limiter will create several drawbacks for them."

"What kind of drawbacks...?" Celia asked fearfully.

"A hero could assimilate with the upper high rank spirit through the spirit bond. The higher the power output, the higher the rate of assimilation. While that rate can be temporarily increased and reduced again, assimilation itself is the act of becoming an unstable, nonhuman existence. There's a chance of the upper high rank spirit seizing control of the body if it goes too far. That was how Saint Erica lost control of her Divine Arms in her final moments."

"So that's what happened..."

"The limiter is what prevents the spirit from seizing control of the body so easily."

"Is it possible to regain control after losing it?"

"Honestly, I don't know. It'd be nice if the limiter helped with that too, but if it doesn't, the hero would have no choice but to wait for the spirit to return their body to them. Or they can attempt to seize it back with force."

However, after fighting Saint Erica, it seemed that even if the limiter worked, control of the body would remain with the spirit for a considerable amount of time.

"So it's dangerous to lose control of the body after all? If that's how Saint Erica lost control of the earthen upper high rank spirit, I mean."

"If Miharu or Aishia are nearby, they'll be attacked without question due to their ties to Lina—Miharu for being her reincarnation, and Aishia for receiving her divinity. I'm not sure what will happen if they aren't nearby... The upper high rank spirits hold a grudge against the Six Wise Gods for sealing them in the Divine Arms, so they may act violently. If they used their transcendent power like that, it'd be an absolute disaster."

"Not only will they destroy everything around them, but the heroes will die too. Should I stop the investigation from proceeding, then? I can tell them that it's dangerous to bring out the power of the heroes. But how do I explain things

in a believable way...?" Celia asked worriedly.

"There's no need. As I said just now, there should be a limiter to prevent them from losing control of their bodies. And there's a need to know how much of their power they can draw out. I will observe from the shadows as well, so let them proceed with the investigation."

It was a rare opportunity for the closely guarded heroes to leave the castle and use their Divine Arms to their full potential out in the Wilderness. Rio wanted to watch and find out how the current heroes compared to Saint Erica.

"All right," Celia agreed obediently.

"I don't believe anyone will be able to summon a monster like the beast of the land yet. Satsuki clearly wasn't at that stage when I last saw her, and neither was Sakata. This is probably due to the limiter—but the problem is how Saint Erica removed that limiter and lost control of her power. I'd like to know the answer to that."

"The phenomena that the Divine Arms create are all spirit arts in the end, right? What if they raised their ability at spirit arts?" Celia theorized.

"The ability of the hero has to match the performance of the weapon. I considered that myself, but..."

There was indeed a high chance of the heroes getting better at handling their Divine Arms if they practiced their spirit arts. Rio had thought of this possibility himself. Perhaps it was the answer to how they could avoid losing control of their bodies to the upper high rank spirits. However...

"Is there something bothering you?"

"For some reason, it felt like Saint Erica fought by relying entirely on the ability of her Divine Arms. I can't imagine she learned spirit arts from anyone either."

The question that rose in Rio's mind was whether spirit arts ability was truly the key to removing the limiter on the Divine Arms. He also questioned whether there was another way to remove the limiter besides increasing ability in spirit arts.

"Right. There are no spirit art casters in the Strahl region, so it would be pretty hard for Saint Erica to find someone to learn from..." Celia had the same questions as Rio.

"In contrast, the hero of ice fought entirely using his spirit arts. Reiss was probably the one to teach him, and from what I saw of that one strike he made on Rodania, he's able to draw out quite a lot of his power."

"I see..."

“That’s why I want to see how much power Satsuki and the other three heroes can draw from their Divine Arms at this moment in time. There may be assumptions that can be made by comparing them to Saint Erica and the hero of ice.”

For example, although they hadn’t spent much time on it, Satsuki and Masato had learned the very basics of using spirit arts already. They could potentially draw out more of their power than Hiroaki or Takahisa, who had never practiced such a thing.

“Got it. I’ll let Aishia know when we find out where the investigation will be held.”

“Okay. Then Aishia can head over during the day tomorrow to keep an eye out for things in her spirit form.”

“Leave it to me,” Aishia agreed immediately.

“Thank you, Aishia. Just to confirm, Celia—Miharu won’t be present, will she?” Rio asked.

“No, she shouldn’t. The plan is to leave her back at the castle.”

“Then can you stay back at the castle too on that day, Aishia? I’m sure it’ll be fine thanks to the limiter, but it wouldn’t hurt to be too careful against upper high rank spirits.”

“Sure. I got it.”

“Instead, I’d like you to come with me, Sora. Is that okay?”

“Of course!” Sora agreed energetically.

“But I might not be allowed to bring Sora with me... The investigation is going to be held in secret, so I don’t think I’ll be permitted to take her without a good reason...” Celia said, voicing her worries.

“I’m thinking of departing for that trip afterwards, so she can leave the mansion and return here the day before that. I’m sorry to be taking you away from the mansion just as you’re getting used to living there... Will you be lonely without everyone, Sora?” Rio peered into Sora’s face.

“Everyone will forget about her a few days after she leaves the mansion, right?” Celia frowned sadly.

On top of being forgotten from the world each time they used their powers, transcendent ones and their disciples also struggled to leave lasting impressions of themselves on other peoples’ memories. As a transcendent one, that effect was immediate for Rio. As a disciple, the effect happened after a few days for Sora.

“Why are you the one looking so sad about it? Sora doesn’t care at all. She’s

already used to it. Traveling with the Dragon King is far more important," Sora said with a completely unbothered look. Not even Sora herself knew whether that was a show of courage or the genuine truth.

"I'm sorry... It's all because you're my disciple," Rio said regretfully. As the disciple of the Dragon King, the rules of god applied to Sora as well, preventing her from making friends like a regular person. He had made her accompany Celia in order to become acquainted with everyone living in the mansion, but that may have caused her more pain now that she had to part with them.

"D-Don't apologize! If the Dragon King didn't save Sora, she would have starved to death ages ago! And unlike the memory erasure of the transcendent powers, strong impressions can still be recalled from time to time! Especially for a disciple like Sora!" Sora explained in a fluster. However, her fluster just made it seem more as though she was lying to make him feel better.

I'll definitely do something about the rules of god. So that I can introduce Sora to everyone properly one day.

Rio silently vowed that to himself.

Interlude: Rodania after Invasion

A few hours prior, in Marquess Rodan's territory capital of Rodania in the Beltrum Kingdom, the Restoration's forces had been completely suppressed, and the city was now under the control of the Beltrum army led by Duke Arbor.

That being said, there was no change to the livelihoods of the commoners. To them, an army had suddenly invaded the noble district, seized control of the area, and swiftly brought down the governor of the city.

Some soldiers were patrolling the commoner district in search of any remnants of the Restoration, but others had booked out entire taverns to celebrate their victory. This atmosphere was only possible due to the invaders being the kingdom's own troops.

In contrast, the only ones walking around the noble district were those of the Beltrum army. Every last member of the Restoration remaining had been restrained and imprisoned. The building that had been used as the headquarters of the Restoration had also been seized by the army and now served as Duke Arbor's temporary residence.

After dinner, Duke Arbor, his son Charles, and the Proxia Empire's ambassador Reiss gathered in a drawing room of that building.

"Goodness. What a pain this has become." Duke Arbor's heavy sigh echoed throughout the room.

"There was nothing we could have done against that water monster..." Charles said nervously, watching for his father's reaction.

"That's only the beginning of our problems. Princess Christina, Princess Flora, and Duke Huguenot all escaped. There's no doubt the regalia is with them. If only you had captured Princess Christina and Duke Huguenot like you were told."

Duke Arbor clicked his tongue in clear annoyance, glaring at Charles. Charles had been the one in charge of locating Christina and Duke Huguenot on their way to the harbor and capturing them. If he had succeeded, the greatest victory of the operation would have been thanks to him—but he had failed.

"I have no excuses..." Charles bowed his head in shame.

"How could they have been whisked away without your knowledge?"

The stern crease in Duke Arbor's brow deepened. Alas, Charles couldn't recall anything about the person who had snatched them from his hands.

What had actually happened was this: Sora had flown over and immediately sent Charles and his men flying, grabbed Christina and Duke Huguenot, then flown away again. Charles and his troops hadn't seen Sora's face, so there wasn't even a chance for the rules of god to apply. It was an extremely skillful performance on Sora's part.

"Well, even if he had captured Princess Christina and Duke Huguenot at that time, there's no telling how things would have gone afterwards. That water monster would have been a product of the cornered hero of water. If we hadn't allowed Princess Christina and Duke Huguenot to escape, he may have used that power for offense instead of defense," Reiss said, extending a lifeline to Charles.

Though it wasn't the work of the hero of water.

He knew that the Yamata no Orochi on the lake hadn't been Hiroaki's work.

"Hmm..." Duke Arbor hummed in contemplation at Reiss's words, leaning back in his seat.

If the water hero is capable of using that much power, we'll need to have our hero of lightning do the same. The intelligent brat won't be easy to manipulate, so I'll have to think of a way to control him...

Duke Arbor carefully noted the need to find a means of militarizing the Beltrum Kingdom's hero Rui Shigekura in the corner of his mind.

"There's no point in lamenting what's happened. Taking their headquarters and reducing their organization's numbers is a fine result in itself. What we should be focusing on right now is the next move."

Reiss gave his constructive opinion and tried to move forward with the discussions.

"The highest priority is the regalia. The worst-case scenario is if Princess Christina or Princess Flora use it for politics. There's no telling what that unpredictable vixen will do when cornered..."

The cornered fox he was referring to was most likely Christina. There wasn't even a hint of respect towards the First Princess of his kingdom in Duke Arbor's words.

"The only place Princess Christina can rely on is the Galarc Kingdom. That's the most likely destination for them to flee to..." Charles offered in hopes of getting back on Duke Arbor's good side.

"That much is obvious," Duke Arbor spat angrily.

"The problem is whether Galarc will see the Restoration as precarious

baggage and discard them, or not. Well, my guess is that they'll take them in," Reiss said, giving his predictions on the situation.

"Even at the risk of certain conflict with our kingdom? The Galarc Kingdom originally sought to use the Restoration as cushioning between our kingdom and the Proxia Empire. With that role lost, wouldn't the Galarc Kingdom be less willing to defend the Restoration...?" Charles expressed his doubts without being discouraged.

And his opinion was right on the mark. He had suffered a number of consecutive defeats due to unlucky matchups with powerful opponents, but his abilities weren't actually that low. He did tend to lose sight of his surroundings when he got too heated, but he was normally capable of analyzing war situations to a considerable degree.

"That's a good point. King Francois is clever. His intelligence makes him sensitive to loss and gain, and his passive stance towards war would normally make him lean in the direction you speak of. However, his intelligence will also sense that Galarc is already bound for conflict with Beltrum—whether he turns away the Restoration or not."

"So he'll keep them close by as negotiation material if war breaks out. Is that what you're saying, Mr. Reiss?" Duke Arbor asked with a sullen look.

"Indeed so. He'd also have a lot to gain if Princess Christina won the war and seized power. And he'd have even more reason to help them if the regalia is in her hands."

"Tch. What a pain this has become." With a vein pulsing with anger at his temple, Duke Arbor clicked his tongue in disgust for the nth time today. He made sure to glare at Charles again too.

"Taking on the Galarc Kingdom will be a much different matter to invading Rodania. They've recently grown closer to the Centostella Kingdom in place of Beltrum, and have more heroes at their disposal than us. And now the hero of water may have awakened his powers... Although there's enough reason to declare war, I strongly recommend you refrain from applying anything more than diplomatic pressure. Your army isn't ready to face an invasion from them at the moment," Reiss said in warning.

"You said their hero couldn't bring out as much power as the hero of ice. Does that mean your nation knows how to draw out the power of the heroes?" Duke Arbor suddenly asked.

"Yes."

"Would you be willing to teach our hero of lightning the same?"

“Unfortunately, I wouldn’t be able to do that without recompense. And there’s nothing our nation is in particularly need of at the moment either...” Naturally, it seemed that Reiss was unwilling to go so far for free.

“Hmph...” A hero that could draw out their power was capable of changing the tides of a battle in an instant. Honestly speaking, Duke Arbor was desperate for such a force—but he couldn’t show that on the surface.

“However, I can lend you the power of the ice hero again as I did this time. Although I will have to kindly decline if you intend on sending him to invade Galarc.”

Duke Arbor shook his head in irritation. “I wouldn’t do that.”

“That being said, the usual diplomatic letter of protest will have no effect. We need something that can apply actual pressure. But the only real usable pawn we have is the captured Marquess Rodan...”

Duke Arbor considered how he could apply diplomatic pressure to the Restoration and Galarc. They had a large number of prisoners, but the leading figure they had was rather lacking.

“Instead of searching for a usable pawn, how about we consider an obtainable one?” Reiss suggested.

“An obtainable one?”

Both Duke Arbor and Charles looked dubious, unable to think of anyone off the top of their heads.

“I believe you agreed to use the Count Claire family as neutral messengers in the agreement you struck before you invaded Rodania.”

With a faint smile on his face, Reiss brought up the Count Claire family. Just what was he plotting?

Chapter 7: The Power of a Hero

Five days had passed since Celia visited the stone house at night. During that time, a date was set for investigating the heroes' Divine Arms. At the same time, it was decided that Sora would leave the Galarc castle.

And so, on the afternoon of the experiment, the residents of the mansion gathered at the entrance to see Sora off.

"Sora...!"

Latifa, Komomo and Aki approached Sora and called her name sadly. True age aside, these three were the closest to Sora in appearance, so they had been the most assertive in becoming friends with her.

"Y-You're too close. What's that look on your face for?" Sora replied, flinching back.

"We'll miss you."

"That's right. You finally started opening up to us."

"And now we have to say goodbye."

Latifa, Komomo, and Aki all spoke with dejected faces. It had been explained to everyone that Sora had been separated from her master in Rodania and was only staying at the mansion temporarily.

Thus, it was only natural for her to leave once her master was found, but after a week together, Latifa and the others already considered Sora to be a precious friend of theirs.

"It's already been decided, so nothing can be done. Sora has to return to the Dra... to her master's side," Sora said, turning her face away in a huff. It was just this morning that she told everyone she had found her master and was leaving.

She had announced without any warning that the magic artifact she possessed —which allowed Sora and her master to keep track of each other's locations— had shown her master was nearby, so she was going to leave and find him.

Of course, no such artifact existed. She had shown them a random artifact and made up the story on the spot. Although it was true that she could detect Rio's general location due to her status as a disciple.

"Sora really loves her master. He's like a parent to her," Celia explained of Sora's awkwardness.

“That’s right. Sora’s master is very, *very* important to her,” Sora emphasized.

“Then you should ask that master if you can visit the mansion again someday! Then you can introduce us to your master too,” Latifa said shyly.

“...Sora can ask.”

It was unlikely to happen. Sora’s tone of voice was so passive, it was clear what she was thinking.

After all, Sora’s master was Rio. She didn’t need to introduce him to everyone—he knew them all already, they had just forgotten him. No one would remember him if she brought him here, and the rules of god would make them all forget him immediately. There was nothing to be gained by bringing him.

“Umm, Sora... Here.”

Perhaps they would never see Sora again. Without knowing why, that was the feeling the girls had. Latifa held out a bag to Sora.

“What is it?”

The bag was pretty heavy. Sora accepted it and looked at it curiously.

“They’re sweets. The ones you said were tasty,” Latifa explained.

“Sweets? For Sora?” Sora blinked.

“You suddenly said you were leaving the mansion, so we asked Miharu and Orphia to help us make them as quickly as possible,” Aki explained.

“We chose types that can last for as long as possible,” Komomo added.

“R-Really?” Sora stared at the bag in her hands, her emotions unreadable. Then, after looking between the girls and the bag several times—

“Thank you, Suzune, Komomo, Aki,” she called their names quietly. “Ayase Miharu, Orphia, Sara, Alma, Satsuki, Sayo, Princess Charlotte, Masato, Gouki, and Kayoko too.”

She also called the names of the older folks watching a short distance away, bowing her head in gratitude.

Satsuki beamed happily. “Oh my. You remembered all of our names?”

“I see I’m going to be referred to by my full name until the end,” Miharu said, scratching at her cheek with a wry smile.

“So there’s a cute side to her after all,” Sara sighed in exasperation.

“S-Sora knew she was going to leave soon, so she chose not to use names on purpose. Sora isn’t used to goodbyes like this.” Sora blushed, suddenly feeling embarrassment. “At any rate, thanks. Sora will ask her master if she can return to this mansion. Is that okay?” she asked worriedly.

“Of course it is. Isn’t that right, everyone?” Satsuki replied, looking around at the others. They all voiced their agreement one after another.

“Thank you... Then Sora will come visit the mansion with her master some day, so you better not forget her.”

Still feeling shy, Sora kept her face down the entire time. But her feelings reached everyone properly.

“It’s a promise. Let’s meet again, Sora!” Latifa hugged Sora front-on while Komomo and Aki clung to her from the sides.

“D-Don’t cling to Sora! Get away... Ugh. Fine. It’s a promise, so make sure you make Sora lots of sweets again.”

“He he. Sora really loves sweets.” Latifa laughed in amusement.

“In that case, you should make them with us next time,” Komomo suggested.

Aki agreed. “Ah, yeah. That’s a good idea.”

“Sora specializes in eating. But maybe once wouldn’t hurt.”

“Then that’s a promise as well!” Latifa added to their promise happily.

“Such pushy people. Okay, since Sora’s going to be coming back anyway, she’s going to go now. Celia.”

“Yep.”

Sora looked up at Celia, who was standing beside her, and signaled for her to move. Celia had been tasked with seeing her out of the castle.

“I won’t say goodbye. Take care and see you later, Sora. Celia too.” Latifa sent them off with her words.

“I’ll make sure she gets to her master safely. See you when I get back.”

“We’ll be waiting!”

Thus, Sora and Celia headed for the carriage waiting beside the mansion.

“Have fun!”

“See you later, Sora!”

Everyone waved Sora off with reluctant expressions.

Sora merely nodded silently in acknowledgment before boarding the carriage with Celia, bag of sweets clutched carefully in her hands.

“Honestly...what’s with them?” she mumbled, puffing up her cheeks shyly as soon as she sat down in the carriage. It was the first time she had lived with people who were so extroverted, when she hadn’t had much contact with people in the first place. She knew that people would forget her in the end, so she always awkwardly brushed them away. That’s what she had done with the residents of the mansion as well.

Yet the residents of this mansion continuously hounded her at every opportunity. She honestly found them an annoyance—but that wasn’t the only emotion she felt. Before she knew it, she found herself thinking she had no other

choice but to humor them by staying a little longer. That turned into her thinking she *wanted* to stay with them a little longer. This was what confused Sora the most.

It may be nice for you to make some friends.

She suddenly recalled the words her master said to her before he headed off to the Divine War a thousand years ago.

Is this what the Dragon King meant by "friends"?

She wasn't quite sure, she thought while clutching the bag in her arms.

"Well? They were all nice, good people, weren't they? Everyone there had a connection to Rio. Although they've forgotten him due to the rules of god..." Celia said with a sad look as she watched Sora.

"Sora knows that much."

"I haven't told you how each one of them is related to him, but do you want to know now?"

"Sora will save that for next time."

"I see..."

"Celia." Sora called the name of the woman sitting across from her.

"Yes, Sora?" Celia said gently.

"In order for Sora to keep her promise with them, something needs to be done about the rules of god. They need to regain their memories of the Dragon King and remember how they met Sora."

Because in a few days' time, everyone in the mansion will forget about Sora...

"You're right."

"Sora will leave with the Dragon King on a journey for hints. That's why you..." Sora said, then paused for a brief moment. "You do your best researching the mask, Celia."

Celia blinked in surprise for a few moments, then smiled brightly. "Thank you. I'll do my best, so you do your best too."

A few moments of silence continued after that, but there was no awkwardness. If anything, Celia felt comfortable in the time that passed.

"Here is fine. Sora's getting off," Sora said, staring out the window.

"Huh? But..."

The plan was to send her to the square of the noble district where she would conveniently come across her master and leave. But they were still another three minutes' walk from the square right now. The coachman looked confused as well.

“Sora’s getting off. She’ll walk from here,” Sora insisted.

“I see... Okay then.”

It seemed she was in the mood to walk. Celia asked the coachman to stop the carriage.

“See you later, then,” Sora said once the horses came to a stop, then stepped off the carriage.

“Yup. The square is that way.” It was unlikely she would get the direction the carriage was moving in wrong, but Celia pointed at the road anyway.

“If you get lost or treated as someone suspicious, tell them you’re with Celia Claire and Princess Charlotte,” she added.

“D-Don’t treat Sora like a child.”

Sora pouted in protest, clutching the bag close to her and running off down the road. Celia wasn’t that worried in the first place.

“See you later, Sora!” she shouted down the road, waving at Sora’s back. Sora paused for a brief second to look back, then resumed running. She must have accelerated at some point, as she was gone in a matter of seconds.

Once Sora reached the square, she turned back to stare in the direction of the castle. After standing there for a few seconds, she dabbed at her eyes with her sleeve as though to wipe away tears.

Then, she headed down a deserted alleyway and took to the skies, heading for the stone house where Rio waited.

◇ ◇ ◇

The next day, it was finally time for Satsuki and the other heroes to test their Divine Arms.

Satsuki, Masato, Hiroaki, and Takahisa boarded an enchanted airship and left for an area roughly an hour away from the capital. Celia, Sara, Orphia, Alma, and Gouki accompanied them. The airship landed on an uninhabited lake to avoid being seen. Then, they unloaded the horse carriages they had brought with them and rode until they reached a vast but uninhabited plain. The group alighted from the carriages, and Hiroaki turned to Takahisa with a cold look.

“You were so against fighting, yet you came along in the end, huh?”

“The powers we have can kill people easily. That’s why we need to know more about our powers. That’s all,” Takahisa replied to Hiroaki in spite of the somewhat irritated look on his face.

Six days ago, Francois had summoned the four heroes to the castle to hear their thoughts on investigating their hero powers. While three of them expressed

their interest in cooperating, Takahisa had been greatly opposed to the idea. Because of that, he had spent the entire next day shut away in the guesthouse mulling things over, but he was back to visiting Satsuki and the others in the mansion after that.

"Hmm. I see," Hiroaki mumbled with disinterest.

"No one should be able to see anything here. Feel free to release your powers to your hearts' content," Francois said to the four heroes.

"Who wants to go first?" Satsuki asked.

"I will." Hiroaki volunteered first, eager to get going. He materialized the Yamata no Orochi he was so proud of. Gouki's eyes widened curiously at the extra long tachi blade.

"Go on then," Satsuki said, yielding the order to him. Neither Masato nor Takahisa had any objections either, so Hiroaki proceeded to use his Divine Arms at full power.

"Make sure you distance yourself adequately before activating your weapon," Gouki said. Francois had asked him to take charge of the investigation today, so he asked for Hiroaki to step far away from the observers before beginning. Sara, Orphia, and Alma were present to protect the observers in case of any emergencies.

"Right..." Hiroaki held his Divine Arms at the ready.

All he had to do was release all his power. He imagined himself pouring all the energy from his body into the blade and activated his technique. He imagined the strongest water monster he could think of—the Yamata no Orochi, the legendary eight-headed creature of Japanese folklore and namesake of his weapon. He wasn't actually summoning a creature called the Yamata no Orochi, but he was producing water that took the shape of a giant eight-headed, eight-tailed dragon, and controlling that water freely.

"Ooh..."

Hiroaki finished casting his technique to reveal a six-headed water dragon. There was no body or tail, but each head was over ten meters in length.

If the lengths of the heads were added together, the total distance would be on par with the highest grade of attack magic. That evaluation would only increase if he could continue controlling the heads after summoning them. Francois, Duke Huguenot, and a number of other observers were wide-eyed in wonder.

"Yamata no Orochi, huh?" Satsuki didn't look impressed.

Any Japanese person would have heard of Yamata no Orochi before,

regardless of their interest in subcultures. It was that well known of a mythological creature. And it was fairly common knowledge that the creature had eight heads and tails.

Satsuki also possessed this knowledge, which was why she found it questionable that something with six heads could be called the Yamata no Orochi.

“I think it’s cool just like this.”

Masato was also aware of the name’s origin, but he still had the heart of a young boy. His eyes sparkled in excitement as he gazed at Hiroaki’s water dragon.

“What do you think, Princess Christina?” Francois asked.

“It’s a magnificent technique, but...it seems far smaller than what was used at Rodania. There are also fewer heads. I doubt it could withstand a single blow from the ice hero.”

Christina gave her honest opinion.

“I see...”

Francois’s reaction was also rather indifferent. There was no denying it was impressive, but he could tell it was not as impressive as Christina had hoped.

No... This isn’t enough. His attack was even stronger. How did that bastard conjure up so much power?

As the caster of the technique, Hiroaki himself was the most aware of how incomplete it was. He frowned in frustration.

He wanted to make the attack bigger than this, but he didn’t know how. He was already putting all of his energy into the Divine Arms. The use of the Divine Arms was purely intuitive, so he didn’t know how to bring out its power.

Until now, he had always believed he could do it if he tried. But this was the reality. He had tried with all his might, and now he had no more excuses.

“Damn it!” Hiroaki shouted angrily, slamming the Yamata no Orochi against the ground. He tried to bring out as much power as he could and gouge the ground. The water lost its shape as it struck the ground, spraying water everywhere and creating a faint rainbow.

“That’s enough! You’ve demonstrated your power. Please stand down, Lord Sakata!” Gouki shouted, running towards Hiroaki with his physical body enhanced.

“...Okay.”

Hiroaki came to a stop after slamming his Divine Arms against the ground and dragged his feet back over to the other observers.

“It was an impressive sight,” Gouki said to Hiroaki, praising him for his strenuous efforts.

“I guess I’ll go next.” The next volunteer to go was Satsuki.

“Do your best, Satsuki.” Masato waved her off as she headed for the spot where Hiroaki had just used his Divine Arms.

“Right...” Satsuki materialized her Divine Arms: a short spear in the shape of a glaive. She took a deep breath—although the plains before her were uninhabited, she still had some fear towards releasing a move with all her strength. She was afraid of knowing how much devastation she could cause by using her power.

“Here I go!”

Clutching the handle of her spear, Satsuki shouted to encourage herself. She then pointed the tip of the spear at the sky and held the spear ready over her head.

As soon as she did, a fierce tornado formed at the base of the tip. It towered at over fifty meters tall and would have easily cut down—or rather, blown away—the six-headed Yamata no Orochi Hiroaki had created.

As a fellow wind user, Gouki hummed in admiration. “Fantastic.”

“Haaah!” Satsuki roared as she swung her spear down, slamming the tornado-entwined blade into the ground. The tornado bore deep into the ground and a fierce wind blasted through the area, avoiding just the area where Satsuki was.

“Orphia, Alma...”

“Got it.”

“Yup.”

Sara, Orphia, and Alma used their spirit arts to create a barrier against the wind and rubble. Orphia created a gentle breeze to blow away the dust obstructing their vision.

“Wow... Satsuki’s amazing.” Masato was utterly astonished.

Is it because she’s learned the basics of spirit arts, like Rio suspected? Lady Satsuki’s clearly bringing out more of her power than Sir Hiroaki.

Celia compared Hiroaki to Satsuki and quietly analyzed the difference. Meanwhile...

What the hell. That Satsuki... She’s definitely stronger than me...

Hiroaki had realized that Satsuki was drawing out more of her power than him. He gritted his teeth with a look of frustration.

When comparing the ground where Hiroaki slammed the Yamata no Orochi

to the area where Satsuki released the tornado, it was clear that the latter had gouged deeper.

"What do you think, Princess Christina?" Francois asked, seeking a comparison with the ice hero.

"While it falls behind the ice hero's attack and the Yamata no Orochi Sir Hiroaki used at Rodania, it's getting there. The area of damage isn't very wide, but its force within a localized area could even surpass that of the ice hero."

This was because the ice hero Renji's attack had been focused on freezing its targets rather than destruction. Even if this move couldn't destroy the Yamata no Orochi that had appeared in Rodania, it should be able to take out one or two heads.

Soon after, Satsuki returned. Masato ran up to her to compliment her. "That was awesome, Satsuki!"

"It was no good. I was so caught up with size, it ended up looking more impressive than it actually was." Satsuki hummed in contemplation, believing she could have condensed the power more.

"I see. I guess I'll go next, then!"

"Yes, go and show us your power. But be careful."

"Got it!"

With an enthusiastic reply, Masato ran off. The Divine Arms he materialized on his way was a large greatsword disproportionate to his still child-sized body. He seemed to have enhanced his physical body, as he was able to pick it up lightly in one hand.

"All right, let's do this!" Masato swung his greatsword around, getting used to the sensation of it in his hand. After some time, he raised it in an overhead stance and paused. With the sword braced ready, he took a deep breath and pictured the phenomenon he wanted to create. Then, he swung the greatsword down with a roar.

"Raaaaaagh!"

The moment the tip of the sword came into contact with the ground, the ground lifted up and crumbled.

"Huh?!" The overturned land formed a tsunami of earth ten meters tall, fanning out from the epicenter to destroy everything in its path. The wave weakened the farther it got from Masato, and came to a complete stop roughly fifty meters out.

"That's impressive..."

Satsuki was taken aback by the resulting destruction. She had more power

when it came to a localized area, but Masato was clearly the winner when it came to applying destruction evenly in a fan shape.

"..." Masato looked down at the weapon in his hands, surprised at his own results. He then beamed happily as he returned to where everyone was.

"You did it, Masato!" Satsuki welcomed him back with applause.

"He he. That was the best I could do with my current strength. I call it the Ruin Slash! Or something like that," Masato joked with a laugh.

"What does Princess Christina have to say?"

"The ice hero's attack also scattered in a fan shape to spread damage. The scale of the phenomenon is still vastly inferior, but Sir Masato could potentially surpass his force in certain aspects," Christina said, reviewing Masato's strike.

"I see. That makes sense—even the highest grades of attack magic vary depending on whether they're single- or multi-target spells. There are also differences based on element, so it would be rash to evaluate someone merely on the scale of their power. Hmm..."

Francois hummed in thought, wondering how to evaluate this. Meanwhile...

Even this brat is better than me. Damn it. All that's left is the pretty boy hero...

Hiroaki felt restless about his current position as third strongest. What if he came in last out of the four of them? He definitely didn't want to lose to this feeble man with the pretty face and disagreeable values. He glared at Takahisa with a sense of rivalry.

"Seems like it's my turn." Takahisa stepped forward with a grim look. "Laevateinn." He called out the name of his Divine Arms—a red sword with a meter-long blade.

"That appearance screams fire element. The name too."

Hiroaki overheard his words and analyzed the Divine Arms of fire he was seeing for the first time. Meanwhile, Takahisa moved to where Masato had been standing a few moments ago and clutched his sword in both hands, squeezing his eyes shut as he brought it close to his face. Then, with a deep breath, he swung the sword.

"Haaah!" In response to Takahisa's roar, the raging flames rose from the blade of his sword. The sword traveled in a horizontal line and released an explosive blast of fire, burning within ten meters in front of him.

The fire scorched the earth for a few seconds before vanishing. The scale of the attack was enough to match that of a highest-grade attack spell, but it was clearly inferior to Satsuki and Masato's, and even Hiroaki's incomplete Yamata

no Orochi.

The ground within the range of his attack was still red with heat, but there was no physical trace of damage like the other heroes.

"..." When he saw the lack of traces, Takahisa himself wondered if he was inferior. He glanced between the sword in his hand and the cooling ground with a disappointed look.

Did he not release all his power? He raised his sword to try once again.

"Please return, Lord Takahisa," Gouki called from behind him.

"Oh, okay..." With a start, Takahisa nodded and dragged his feet back to where the observers were.

"The other heroes excelled in scale, but..."

There didn't seem to be any aspect he surpassed the other heroes in. Francois didn't seek an opinion from Christina regarding Takahisa. During that time, Takahisa returned.

Lilianna approached him and bowed. "Good work, Sir Takahisa."

"Ah... Thanks, Lily. How... How was it?" Takahisa asked with uncertainty. He probably felt pathetic at the sight of his attack barely leaving a mark when he looked behind himself.

"It was wonderful," Lilianna answered without hesitation. In reality, it was a fine move. If the subjects of comparison hadn't been fellow heroes, he would have been openly praised instead.

"Well, depending on where you use it, you could cause the most secondary damage," Hiroaki said to Takahisa with a superior smirk, believing he had won over him.

Tch. What am I getting relieved for, coming in third before this coward? If that ice brat were here, he'd be in first and I'd be in fourth.

Realizing he was feeling relieved at avoiding last place, Hiroaki grimaced bitterly. He had decided he would win over Renji, so coming second last wasn't good enough.

"What do you mean by that?" Takahisa asked sullenly.

"I mean exactly what I said. If the burning area spreads into more fire, your secondary damage would be even greater. Isn't that the strength of all fire attacks? I mean, I'm just guessing, but..." Hiroaki ruffled his own head and looked away.

Damn it... Are there elements that are better than others? What's the difference between us? How are they drawing out more of their Divine Arms' power? Hiroaki racked his brains for a way to become stronger. Meanwhile...

Hmm. Well, that's about the result I expected. Gouki was satisfied with the results. If he had to put a reason to it, then he would guess it was due to Satsuki and Masato being in the middle of learning spirit arts. Besides, only Satsuki and Masato had any experience handling weapons out of the four heroes—he could tell with his expert eye that Hiroaki and Takahisa were amateurs.

That aside, the Divine Arms are outrageous. Who in their right mind would give inexperienced children who have never received any training this much power? The thought of them being abused is truly terrifying...

Regular children had come into possession of so much power. This was something Gouki found frightening. He was especially scared for Satsuki and Masato, whom he considered his family already.

If they're willing, then it may be time to get serious about teaching them how to fight.

Gouki's innate kindness reminded him to offer them his assistance in the near future.

And there were others who had watched everything take place. It was Rio and Sora, who had heard the schedule for the investigation from Celia in advance and positioned themselves high in the sky above the plains.

"What a low-level demonstration," Sora muttered with a disgusted look. She seemed to find the ability of the four heroes on the ground to be of poor quality. Meanwhile...

As I expected, it seems their experience in spirit arts is key to how much power they can draw from their Divine Arms.

Rio concluded his prediction was correct after witnessing the four of them demonstrate their moves. However, at the same time...

But that doesn't explain how Saint Erica was able to use so much power when she was relying entirely on her weapon. Did she receive training in spirit arts from someone? If not, then is there another reason?

The mystery deepened.

There has to be another method of drawing forth the heroes' power besides spirit arts.

After a moment of contemplation, Rio came up with a hypothesis to that mystery. And in order to find evidence of this hypothesis...

I should investigate what I can about the path Saint Erica took after being summoned into this world.

Rio decided to investigate the land Erica was summoned in while they journeyed to find clues about Lina. With that thought, he called out to Sora.

“Let’s go, Sora.”

“Right away!”

Thus, Rio and Sora left the Galarc Kingdom.

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Chapter 8: Celia's Battle

Three days had passed since the investigation into the heroes' powers. It was the afternoon, and Celia had been summoned by Galarc's King Francois and the Restoration's leader Christina. It was apparently over something important involving the Restoration.

"Father, I have brought Lady Celia."

"Celia Claire at your service."

Charlotte was the one to bring Celia to Francois's office.

"You may enter."

"Pardon the intrusion."

With Francois's permission, Celia and Charlotte entered the room. Christina and Duke Huguenot were already present.

I wonder what this is about... Celia questioned why she was summoned here, with the leaders of both groups. Her suspicions only grew at the gloomy expression on Christina's face. "Have a seat first."

"Excuse me." Celia sat beside Duke Huguenot, across from Francois and Christina.

"A letter arrived from the Beltrum Kingdom," Francois said to her, immediately cutting to the chase.

"Regarding...?"

"See for yourself."

"If you don't mind." Celia picked up the letter on the table and read it. "This is..."

In short, the letter was both an objection to the Galarc Kingdom's actions and a demand for the Restoration's surrender.

First, the Galarc Kingdom was to cease its provision of shelter to the remnants of the Restoration, and the Restoration was to immediately dissolve and surrender. Christina, Flora, and Duke Huguenot were to be handed over, and the regalia Christina had taken had to be returned as well.

Second, the Galarc Kingdom's continued furnishment of refuge to the Restoration and refusal of the regalia's return could potentially trigger an immediate war. A lack of response would also be grounds for an outbreak of

war.

Third, the written response of the Galarc Kingdom and Restoration was to be personally delivered by Celia of the Claire family. No guards or escorts were to accompany her. She was to bring the letter to a checkpoint near the border, after which an envoy of the Beltrum Kingdom would act as her guide.

Fourth, the time limit for a response was one week, and the letter was to be delivered to a fort near the border between Galarc and Beltrum.

Fifth, if Celia failed to deliver the letter within the time limit, the role of the Claire family as neutral messengers would be voided. The Beltrum Kingdom would no longer guarantee the safety of anyone associated with the Claire family.

These were the selfish and one-sided demands contained in the letter.

“I have finished reading,” Celia said, gently returning the letter to the table.

“As we expected, they’ve decided to make a bold move now that the Restoration has lost their base and most of their personnel.”

Francois seemed to have expected such demands already. He sighed heavily, a grim expression on his face.

But Celia showed no objection to the letter, accepting them readily. “I agree to the terms. All I need to do is bring the written response to the designated location, right?”

“P-Please wait a minute!” Christina called for a halt in a fluster.

“Yes?”

“This may be a trap,” she emphasized in a sharp tone.

“That’s true... But there’s no proof of that. And the other side has designated me by name, so there is no option other than to go.”

“But...”

“If we ignore this letter, my father will be killed in Beltrum. I cannot let him die like that. I apologize for bringing my personal feelings into this,” Celia admitted, bowing her head apologetically.

“There’s nothing you need to apologize for, Professor...”

“The Galarc Kingdom would also be troubled if I refused to fulfill my duty,” Celia added resolutely.

“We are prepared to send a different messenger...” Francois suggested.

“I’m sorry. It may be naive of me to think this way as a noble, but I do not wish to stand by as my father is killed,” Celia said, rejecting his offer.

“I see... In that case, I will not stop you.”

“I... I could go in your place, Professor...” Christina said with a pale

expression.

“That would be exactly what Duke Arbor wants! The Restoration will be over if Your Highness is captured. And you’d be setting a terrible image to members of the organization if you went in order to cover for me. Please think of the organization first, Princess Christina,” Celia admonished in a firm tone.

“Forgive me. If only I hadn’t formed that agreement with the Beltrum Kingdom... I never imagined the conditions intended to protect you and your family would backfire like this.”

Christina lowered her head.

It was the role of a leader to suppress their emotions and think only of the organization. They should only think and act for the benefit of the organization as a whole. Christina was well aware of this—there was no way someone as intelligent as her wouldn’t.

However, her emotions didn’t agree. She just couldn’t agree to handing her former teacher over to Duke Arbor without any resistance.

But nevertheless, Christina was currently in a position where she had to swallow her emotions.

“I’m sorry...”

She could only apologize to Celia in shame. There was nothing more vexing than being unable to protect those dear to her.

“Princess Christina. Someone of your caliber shouldn’t be apologizing to anyone. Won’t you please lend an ear to my words? Please, I beg of you.” Celia bowed her head.

“P-Professor, there’s no need for that...” Christina tried to stop her in a fluster.

“Please allow me, Celia Claire, to deliver the reply from the Restoration and Galarc Kingdom to Duke Arbor. I will read the letter in front of the duke and convey your intentions clearly. On top of that, I vow to return safely. So please, entrust this role to me. If you believe in me, please, let me do this.”

Celia firmly declared her intention to fulfill the duty of delivering the response. She continued to lower her head before Christina, begging her to entrust the position to her.

“Please raise your head, Professor...”

“If you agree to let me deliver the reply to Duke Arbor, then gladly.”

“You’re sure of this...?” Christina said with a weakened expression.

“My father is in the middle of returning to Beltrum to fulfill his role. As his daughter, I cannot abandon my duty either. So please...!” Celia pleaded

desperately. Her feelings seemed to reach Christina.

“I understand... For now, we will focus on what to write in the response. If you haven’t changed your mind by the time we’re done, then...I will entrust this to you, Professor.” Christina placed her trust in Celia and reluctantly agreed.

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After the discussion had ended, Celia made her way back to the mansion with Charlotte.

“Umm, Princess Charlotte. I have a favor to ask of you,” Celia said to Charlotte, who was walking beside her on the way back.

“Yes, Lady Celia?”

“Could you keep quiet about the reply I have to deliver to Duke Arbor?”

“What am I meant to say to the others if you don’t return?” Charlotte didn’t agree immediately. Instead, she questioned Celia on the potential problems of staying quiet.

“I will return. No matter what,” Celia replied firmly.

“That’s not answering my question.”

“Well, if I told everyone about my situation, they’d all feel really worried for me, no? They’re all so kind, they’d treat the situation as if it were happening to themselves and try to save me.”

“Of course. If it were within my abilities, I would have tried to offer help too.” Charlotte gave Celia a reproachful look of concern. It was a rare show of blunt emotion from her.

“Thank you very much.”

“Thanking me with such a happy face isn’t going to help your case...”

“But I can’t help feeling happy.”

“Hmph...” Charlotte pouted in embarrassment.

“But to answer your question: if I were to leave without saying anything, everyone would probably be really angry at me. They’d wonder why I didn’t tell them—why I didn’t rely on them. And they’d feel even greater sadness,” Celia said with a guilty look.

“So you do know.”

“Yes... But you understand me, right Princess Charlotte? This isn’t a matter they can do anything about.”

“...I won’t deny that.”

“If they tried to accompany me or protect me from the shadows, the agreement between the Restoration and Beltrum would be voided. I can’t allow

that to happen."

If the demands this time were a trap by Duke Arbor, his goal would be to capture Celia. If someone came to her immediate rescue like that, the Beltrum side would be able to raise a fuss about bringing guards when told not to.

"You have admirable loyalty."

"Princess Christina and Princess Flora are my former students. It may be discourteous of me to think this way, but I still consider them my students."

Celia explained how she felt loyalty to Christina and Flora beyond their status as royalty.

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“It makes me envious of them to hear that. Perhaps my school life wouldn’t have been so tedious if I had an instructor like you,” Charlotte mumbled with a twinge of jealousy.

“They’re all such important people to me, and that’s why I can’t rely on them for everything. That’s what I believe. So please—I’m sorry that the course of events means I have to burden you with this, but...” Celia came to a stop and bowed her head deeply to Charlotte.

“I have one—no, two conditions.” Charlotte also stopped.

“What are they?”

“First of all, please come home no matter what.”

“Of course.” Celia had intended on doing that from the beginning.

“Secondly, once you’ve returned, I’m going to tell them everything you said just now.”

“...” The second condition came as a surprise to Celia, who blinked in shock.

“That way you can suffer the wrath of everyone yourself. I’ll even add a spin to this conversation to trouble you more.”

So make sure you come back for it, Charlotte emphasized.

“Gladly.” Celia nodded with a smile.

“Then let’s go.”

“Okay.”

Charlotte puffed up her cheeks slightly and resumed walking. Celia followed behind her.

Can I discuss this with you further tonight, Aishia? Celia addressed the person accompanying her in the shadows through telepathy.

Sure. A reply came immediately, and they continued off towards the mansion.

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After returning home, Celia and Charlotte went about their day without bringing up what had happened at the castle again.

They chatted about trivial things, ate dinner together, then bathed and returned to their respective rooms to rest for the night. When Celia returned to her room, she turned on a light and glanced around. Sora, who had been here just a few nights ago, had left with Rio to find clues on Lina. The short time they had spent together had been full of life, making everything feel oddly silent right now. However...

Are you there, Aishia?

Yup, I'm here. Aishia was beside her in her spirit form.

If you have a moment, can I talk to you about what I mentioned this afternoon?

Sure.

I didn't expect this to happen the moment Rio left... But I consider this to be the perfect opportunity.

Perfect opportunity? Why is that?

Rio's got enough on his plate with the rules of god to worry about. I can't trouble him with my own problems as well. There's a limit to how much you and Rio can fight right now too.

But I'm going to go with you.

It seemed like Aishia intended on accompanying Celia in her spirit form, but...

That's actually what I wanted to talk to you about... I don't want to be baggage to you two any longer, Celia said eagerly.

You've never been baggage to us.

I'm glad you think that way, but I also want you to stay at the castle and look after everyone else. Can I count on you for that? The mansion has been previously attacked once already.

Something's more likely to happen on your end. Gouki and Sara's group are here. I'm more worried about you, Celia. Aishia conveyed her thoughts with honesty.

I know... Until now, I would have relied on you too. But that can't keep happening anymore. I can't just rely on you and Rio for everything. I want to prove that I can be an asset too. So this time...can you trust me to go alone?

Are you that confident? Aishia asked after a long pause.

Yeah, I am... Brimming with it, to be honest. I've become a lot stronger now—I know many more magic spells. Celia swung her delicate arms and patted herself proudly on the chest.

In that case, prove it. Fight with me, Celia, Aishia proposed, in order to ascertain whether she could send Celia off without worrying.

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The next morning marked Celia's departure from the Galarc Castle. She left the capital without saying a word about the demands from Duke Arbor.

After riding an enchanted airship out to the westmost city of the Galarc Kingdom, she got on a griffin led by one of Charlotte's female knights and

headed for the Beltrum border.

They reached the border by early afternoon and made their way to the first meeting place designated by Duke Arbor: the checkpoint. The Galarc knights were not permitted to accompany her beyond that point. A small squad of Beltrum troops was waiting at the checkpoint. They were to escort Celia's horse carriage to the fort where Duke Arbor was waiting.

Celia was wary of any traps Duke Arbor may have set along the trip, but her fears were unfounded. Roughly half an hour passed without any incident.

"Mmm..." Celia yawned quietly.

Oops, I have to be more careful. I shouldn't have stayed up so late last night.

There was no telling what trouble the slightest lapse of caution could invite. Alone in the carriage, she quickly shook her head and pulled herself together. After another half an hour or so of travel, they arrived at the fort where Duke Arbor was.

"Get out," urged her so-called guard of an enemy knight. Celia alighted from the carriage as the fort gate slammed shut behind her.

"..." She stared around the fort silently. Ten or so meters in front of her stood Duke Arbor, Charles, Reiss, and Renji in a row. Numerous knights surrounded Celia, with the mercenaries Lucci and Arein that Reiss was friendly with among them.

They weren't even bothering with pretenses—they were clearly conveying their intention to keep her prisoner here. As she had expected, they probably weren't going to let her return without a fight.

"This is quite the welcome," Celia said to Duke Arbor with her brow furrowed.

"What do you mean?" Duke Arbor tilted his head calmly. "Really, though. How dare you shamelessly show up after ruining your marriage into the Arbor family." He glared harshly at Celia, making reference to the incident of her wedding to Charles.

"Come to think of it, I was abducted from that wedding," Celia replied, provoking him with a relaxed smile.

"Hmph! So you were an unruly horse underneath that young and obedient appearance. I will give you one chance. It's still not too late, you know?" Duke Arbor asked boldly.

"Too late for what?"

"Marry Charles and surrender to the Arbor house. I will guarantee the survival of the Claire house if you do."

“You must be kidding me. Have you forgotten the terms of the agreement with the Restoration already?” Celia returned the question with strong objection.

“If you think that the agreement will continue once the Restoration is destroyed, then you’re more foolish than I thought. I’d have to revise my evaluation of you as the youngest girl genius to graduate from the Royal Academy,” Duke Arbor said mockingly.

“The Restoration still exists.”

“In a precarious state, perhaps. That’s why this is your last chance. Become mistress to Charles.”

“You’d have to kill me first.” Even Celia had to refuse such an oppressive demand like that, her face twitching.

“Celia...” Pride wounded by her cold attitude, Charles glared at Celia with a huge grimace on his face.

“Fool. There’s no return from this place either way for you.” Duke Arbor’s sneer deepened.

“Hey, was there a need to call me all the way here to catch a single girl? She’s trembling on her feet,” Renji, who stood nearby, complained to Reiss in annoyance.

Indeed, although Celia’s legs were hidden by her long skirt, they were trembling faintly. She was acting relaxed before Duke Arbor, but it was really all a bluff. Renji didn’t feel particularly enthusiastic about capturing such a frail woman and sighed listlessly.

“If she were alone, there’d be no need for you to be here. But keep your attention on the skies overhead.”

However, Reiss called Renji to pay attention to his surroundings—almost as though he was expecting Celia to have other allies.

“Got it.” Renji nodded with another sigh, directing his gaze at the sky with renewed attention.

“You are breaking off negotiations. Is that how I am to interpret your words?” Duke Arbor glared at Celia even more harshly.

“I’m not breaking off anything, I’m here with the written response from the Restoration and Galarc Kingdom. I will leave as soon as business is done, so allow me to read their message and ensure that there are no communication issues.” Celia maintained that she was only here to fulfill her role.

“There will be no need for that,” said Duke Arbor.

“What do you mean by that?”

“We will now proceed to restrain you.”

“Am I correct to assume you are revoking your side of the agreement? Your cause will no longer be justifiable if you do this. Are you sure?”

“Oh, we have no intention of revoking the agreement. The ones who will be going against their word will be the Claire family. That is our justification for this.”

“What do you mean?” Celia raised her brow in suspicion.

“I mean what I said. The Claire family will go against the agreement.”

“I would never do such a thing.”

“No, you already have. Once we restrain you, we’ll have all the time in the world to get a confession out of you.”

Even Celia’s expression had to stiffen at that. “You intend on forcing a fake confession out of me? I would never yield to you!” she declared firmly.

“Hmm. Let’s see if you can still say such things once you’re caught. Hey...” Duke Arbor jerked his chin, ordering the knights around Celia to apprehend her. The knights started surrounding her from a distance of a few meters away, ensuring she couldn’t flee.

“If that is your intention, then I will exercise my right to self-defense. I must achieve my goal and return no matter what,” Celia protested with a nervous look.

“Bwa ha ha ha! Dumb girl. You’re so scared, your voice and feet are both trembling. I’d like to see you try.” Duke Arbor laughed at Celia as though he could see right through her.

“...” Celia trembled from head to toe. She was truly scared. There was no way she wouldn’t be. She was in a real battle, all by herself. Her opponents were all career soldiers with bigger bodies and more war experience, and they had her surrounded.

Calm down. Calm down, me...

She had already decided. She wouldn’t rely on Rio and Aishia to fight for her anymore. She would fight in their place, so that they didn’t have to. After all, she didn’t want them to lose their memories. She wanted Rio, Aishia, and now Sora to remember them all.

Today, here and now, I will prove that I can fight alone!

She wouldn’t let herself be a hindrance, someone who had to be protected, anymore. She hadn’t let Aishia follow her here either. She was going to discard her dependence on other people to protect her. For Celia, this was her first time truly fighting alone.

“*Assumo: Gladius.*”

"...Hmm?" Duke Arbor and the majority of the others there tilted their heads. The spell Celia had suddenly cast was unfamiliar to all of them, with the exception of Reiss.

Don't tell me... Is that...?

Reiss, who had been watching the skies for an ambush for some time now, returned his gaze to the ground with a gasp when he heard Celia's spell. He focused his attention on what was going on in front of him just in time to see a complex magic circle surround Celia's body.

"H-Hey, what are you doing?! Seize her before she tries anything funny!" Duke Arbor ordered his knights in a fluster.

"R-Right away!"

Their confidence in capturing a small woman like Celia had caused the knights to let their guards down. They quickly started running towards her, but Celia ran towards one of the knights approaching her, closing the distance to him in an instant.

"Hah!"

She then grabbed him and threw him with ease, stealing the sword at his waist and claiming it for herself. However, the knight had only been equipped with a wooden training sword in order to apprehend her. Nevertheless, Celia had obtained a weapon.

"Wha...?!" Tension filled the knights' faces in an instant.

"*Si vis pacem, para bellum.*" Celia cast another new spell. Another complex magic circle covered her body. It was a spell impossible to mimic with modern magic and sorcery, a spell that cast a powerful physical body enhancement that was normally only obtainable through ancient enchanted swords.

"*Augendae Corporis.*" The knights reacted quickly to her. As soon as they saw her movements, they used their magic to enhance their physical abilities. They accelerated as soon as the spell activated and approached Celia to seize her.

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“What?!”

Celia’s speed exceeded that of the knights. She weaved through the knights faster than the eye could see, escaping their encirclement. Then, with her back against the wall of the fort, she faced the knights with her wooden sword held ready.

“Damn it! Draw your swords!” the squad commander of the knights ordered. Everyone drew their nonlethal wooden swords and surrounded Celia.

“You may hurt her as much as you need, just don’t kill her!” Duke Arbor yelled. Thus began the battle between Celia and the knights of the Beltrum Kingdom.

“Haaa!” Celia boldly charged at the knights. There was no sign of the fear she had showed earlier.

“Wh-What?!” With skillful swordsmanship and light footwork, Celia used her physical abilities that surpassed human limits and overwhelmed the knights.

“Oh?” Even Renji, in all his annoyance, was now watching her fight with deep interest.

There’s no mistaking it. She’s acquired numerous celestial magic spells. She previously used another spell too—was she always able to cast such things? It wouldn’t be a concern if she specialized in close-ranged combat, but...

Reiss was observing Celia’s fight with his cold gaze in order to determine how much of a threat she was. Celia, who had only been able to fight as a turret-style sorcerer until now, had completely transformed into a swordsman that specialized in close combat.

“Hey, what’s the meaning of this?!”

“Being outsmarted by a sorcerer girl like this...”

“Guh...”

Celia got up close to one knight after another, hitting them with the back of her sword and knocking them unconscious. There were still knights left.

They may outnumber her, but the average knight has no chance, Reiss concluded.

“Lucci, Arein. Support the knights and capture her!” he ordered the two mercenaries that wielded enchanted swords capable of physical body enhancements. The two were already prepared for combat and swiftly leaped at Celia without bothering to give Reiss a response.

“Huh?!”

Celia evaded their swords with astounding reflexes, seeing through their attacks and moving lightly on her feet.

“Hey, Arein! We’re going to corner her!” Lucci ordered Arein with a fierce grin.

“Okay, okay.” Arein immediately moved behind Celia.

“Say, little lady. How are you doing that? You couldn’t even run in a straight line before!”

Celia’s movements were completely different from before. She couldn’t even swing a sword with her previous athletic ability, yet she was now fighting with enough skill to send the most experienced veteran knight fleeing with their tail between their legs. However, Celia wasn’t foolish enough to entertain them with conversation. Her expression was cold and calm.

“You even feel like a veteran fighter now. How is that possible?” Arein questioned the sudden change in Celia as well.

“Well, I guess we can just find out by crossing swords!” Lucci lunged to attack Celia again. In contrast to the enchanted sword in his hand, Celia only had a wooden sword. It was obvious which side would lose if they crossed swords.

“...”

With elegant footsteps, Celia changed her focus to evasion. Lucci and Arein tried to sandwich her between them, but she avoided their attempts skillfully. Using only minimal movements, she evaded their swords right before their eyes.

“Hey now...”

“Damn, she’s good...”

Lucci and Arein found themselves impressed by her abilities. The knights were also chasing her around the fort, but they couldn’t keep up with her speed and failed to land a single hit.

“N-No way, just what kind of magic did she use...?”

Duke Arbor and Charles were also rendered speechless by the sight of her fighting. Physically enchanted adults that were trained for war were being led around by the nose, and in such large numbers.

It’d be best to consider her a different person to who she was until now. Forget the great heroes, she could even be on par with the disciples...

Reiss’s appraising gaze on Celia grew harsher.

Just whose doing could this be? Something must have happened after Renji was knocked out in Rodania... Was it his doing after all? No, but he...

The situation was completely unexpected for Reiss as well. His thoughts were unable to keep up with the circumstances, leaving a rare look of confusion on his face.

“She darts about like a damn fly...”

“The other knights are in the way.”

Arein and Lucci were at a loss as to how to attack, still unable to capture Celia. Celia had used her small frame and the closed battlefield to her advantage, maneuvering around the outnumbered situation. The knights became obstacles preventing the mercenaries from closing in on her.

The difference in weapons is a pain. Celia lacked the ability to land a finishing move. If she were to continue this close-combat battle, she would prefer to have a metal weapon.

I just want to get this letter to Duke Arbor. Ugh.

She could probably use magic to change the situation, but doing so would also change her opponents’ approach. She was extremely wary of Reiss and Renji, who were still watching for now.

Besides, if anyone died here, they’d probably find fault with her later—she had to handle this situation without killing anyone by accident.

Fine. If it’s going to be like this, then...

Celia accepted her fate and made her move. There was no end to the number of knights around her, so she ignored them and the mercenaries to run right up to her main target, Duke Arbor.

“Wha?!” Duke Arbor stiffened.

“Hmph!” Renji stepped between them, using the handle of Cocytus, his halberd-shaped Divine Arms, to block Celia’s sword, but Celia pressed her weapon against Renji’s in silence.

“What a woman. It’d be a shame to kill you, to be honest.” Renji stared at Celia from close up, smirking, but immediately after, a hysterical shriek sounded behind him. It came from Duke Arbor.

That can’t be, the woman is in front of me!

For a brief moment, Renji’s focus was directed behind him. He noticed a stone pillar growing from the ground out of the corner of his eye. Duke Arbor had been pushed up by that pillar—there was a spell formula glowing where he had originally stood.

So she can even cast spells silently now.

Reiss immediately saw through what happened. But even as he thought that, another spell formula glowed at Celia’s feet. A stone pillar burst out of the ground, pushing her slender body up into the air.

“Hah!” Celia leaped from the pillar to where Duke Arbor was flying through the air. She grabbed him and landed on top of the fort wall.

“You won’t get away.”

Renji, Lucci, and Arein all raised their physical abilities to run up the wall easily, surrounding Celia.

“The tables have been turned, you realize?” Celia said to the three of them coldly. She pointed her wooden sword at Duke Arbor at the edge of the wall. With a little push, he would go tumbling off the wall.

“With a toy sword like that, just try it. The moment you push the duke, or the moment you swing your sword, the three of us will kill you. Would you rather die than surrender?” Arein threatened coldly.

After brief contemplation, Celia pointed the wooden sword at Duke Arbor and said, “I’m merely here to deliver a letter. Once I’ve fulfilled that role, I will leave.”

“So she claims. What do we do, Duke?” Arein asked Duke Arbor.

“Ugh... I’ll accept the letter.”

Half a step farther and he would fall backwards off the wall. Seized with fear at the thought of falling over ten meters, Duke Arbor agreed to Celia’s negotiations.

“Then here. This is the response from the Galarc Kingdom and Restoration.”

With her free hand, Celia reached into her breast pocket and took out two envelopes, handing them to Duke Arbor.

“...I have received it.”

“Please open it. I will now proceed to read the letters, so please confirm that the contents are as written. Once done, please stamp them with the Arbor house’s seal of receipt,” Celia said.

“Hah. How are you going to read it with one hand? Do you want me to hold your copies so you can read them?” Lucci asked mockingly. It was custom for a second copy of the response to be prepared and read aloud in front of the recipient in order to certify that the letter was received. On top of that, the recipient was to stamp a copy of the letter to be brought back, proving the response was received.

“I’ve memorized every word of the letters, so there will be no need for that. Once you’ve stamped your copies of the letters, I will give you the copies for me to bring back, so please stamp those as well.”

“Are you serious?” Lucci’s face twitched. He didn’t think she would allow him to approach so easily, but he hadn’t been expecting that answer.

“I will now begin reading.”

Thus, with her wooden sword pointed at Duke Arbor, Celia began reciting the letter.

Duke Arbor checked the letter against Celia's words while shaking at the edge of the fort wall. Whether he had the guts to find fault with the slightest mistake aside, Celia had truly memorized every word of the letter and read it aloud smoothly.

"Has she seriously memorized every word?" Lucci muttered, expressing his doubts.

"Some people can do that. You're just stupid. Now act serious," Arein warned him with a sigh. Celia continued reading while they conversed, eventually approaching the end of the second letter.

"Next is the final condition. Please listen to this carefully," Celia said in warning. The current letter she was reading was from the Restoration to the Beltrum Kingdom.

"Wh..." Duke Arbor's eyes swept over the text before she could read it.

"Y-You must be kidding me! I would never accept this!" he yelled angrily, forgetting how he was standing at the wall's edge.

"I will pass on that message upon my return. But before that, I must read this last condition out loud. Please remain silent," Celia said, holding the wooden sword with more strength.

"Guh..." That sapped Duke Arbor of his energy. Using that opportunity, Celia began reading the response Christina had entrusted her.

"*I, Christina Beltrum, First Princess of the kingdom of Beltrum, formally declare my position as first in line to succeed the throne.*"

"S-Stop! I won't accept this...!"

Duke Arbor stubbornly refused to listen to her, but Celia silenced him by thrusting the wooden sword at him once more.

"*I, Christina Beltrum, hereby declare my accession as queen of Beltrum. I will share royal authority over the kingdom of Beltrum alongside my father, King Philip Beltrum. The royal insignia entrusted to me by my father is proof of my legitimacy. As the leader of the Beltrum Kingdom, I am formally requesting a meeting with its other leader, Philip III. I will not accept a proxy representative. Considering the current political state of our kingdom, I propose the meeting be held in the Galarc Castle. A reply to this letter should be brought to the Galarc Castle by Count Roland Claire within one month. If no response arrives within this time frame, it will be assumed that King Philip III has no objections to Christina Beltrum's accession as queen.*"

Celia finished reading to the end of the letter. The contents were essentially a declaration of a dyarchy.

“Sharing royal authority? Two rulers of one kingdom? You people must be out of your minds! Are you trying to split the nation into two?! And the regalia really was stolen!” Duke Arbor yelled angrily.

“I do not have the authority to give a formal answer, but the regalia was taken with permission and not stolen. If you have an objection to the accession, you’ll need to submit your protest according to the procedures established in the kingdom’s laws.”

“Urgh...” Duke Arbor fell silent, a vein of anger bulging at his brow.

This is why... This is why I didn’t want to let her use the regalia!

What did Christina’s declaration of accession mean for the kingdom?

In short, it was what Celia had just said; denying the legitimacy of accession would require following the procedures provided in the national law. This meant that Christina would remain queen until her legitimacy was denied through the proper legal procedures.

Even Duke Arbor, who had been given the right to represent King Philip III as prime minister, couldn’t avoid those procedures. If he skipped the procedures to forcibly deny her accession, he would lose his own legitimacy.

Thus, if he wanted to deny Christina’s position as the new queen, he absolutely had to go through the national law. Duke Arbor had been flawlessly forced into going along with Christina’s plan.

“I will also be reporting to Her Majesty of your attempt to harm me today, so please keep that in mind,” Celia added, making sure to protest how she had been treated today.

“What...?” Duke Arbor’s face twitched even more.

“The letter also includes details regarding what should happen from here on. My father Roland should have returned to the Claire territory by now, so ensure that he is the one you send to the Galarc Kingdom with your reply. Now, please mark the letters with your magic seal,” Celia ordered Duke Arbor in a matter-of-fact tone. She put her strength into her sword as though to emphasize what would happen if he didn’t.

“Grr...” Duke Arbor was reluctant. But he made up his mind after a few seconds and pressed his finger against the spot marked with a spell formula, pouring his magic essence into it. The spell formula glowed, registering Duke Arbor’s essence pattern.

“Now do the same to these letters.”

“Hmph...” Duke Arbor pressed his magic seal to prove he’d received the letters in silence.

“With this, the response has been delivered.” Celia confirmed the magic seals were applied and returned her copy of the letters to her breast pocket.

“It doesn’t matter anymore. Such declarations will make no difference at this late stage...” Duke Arbor spat hatefully.

“Any further objections will be heard at the meeting. Now, if you would excuse me,” Celia replied coolly, wrapping up the conversation. She had completed her duty, so now all she had to do was return. The marked letters had to be brought back no matter what.

“Now that you’re done with your business, it’s time to attend to ours.”

For Renji, Lucci, and Arein, their turn started here. They had no intention of letting Celia return like this, so they surrounded her with their weapons in their hands.

“Heh heh...” Lucci gave Celia a leering smile, as though to question how she planned on leaving. Indeed, the problem was how she would leave.

“I said, excuse me.” With a single bow, Celia leaped down from the ten-meter-high wall.

“We won’t let you!” Lucci and the others immediately jumped after her with their bodies physically enhanced.

“*Alis Luminis*!” Celia shouted as she fell.

Two small magic circles appeared on her back and began to emit a wave of light, as though she had grown wings of light.

“Wha?!” The men were at a loss for words. Celia flew away from the fort in a single burst without flapping her wings, leaving behind a trail of light.

“Ha...ha ha...ha...” Arein could only laugh. He gazed at Celia as she rapidly gained distance from the fort.

“Man... She’s really on another level now,” Lucci laughed too, commending his enemy.

It’s hard to dislike strong women like her, for some reason.

Renji had also forgotten his position as her enemy and regarded her highly. Just then, Reiss landed lightly beside him.

“We’re chasing her, Renji,” he said. “Kill her with your strongest attack.”

“...Huh? What are you saying?” Renji was taken aback by the sudden order. Besides, Celia was already a hundred meters or more away.

“Just do as I say. She needs to be eliminated here and now.”

“H-Hey!” Reiss grabbed Renji’s body before he could object further and flew after Celia in plain sight of everyone.

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A hundred meters away from the fort...

Are they following me?

Celia noticed Reiss flying after her with Renji in his arms. Reiss was using wind spirit arts to accelerate himself in a way that Rio often used as well, and he was rapidly closing the distance to her.

Celia attempted to accelerate, but Reiss followed suit.

“Release your attack the moment you’ve readied your magic essence,” he ordered Renji with clear murderous intent.

“You sure don’t hold back, huh... Fine.” Despite his words, Renji’s mouth was twisted in a delighted smirk. He held his halberd at the ready and focused on generating magic essence.

That’s so much essence! Don’t tell me...

Celia detected the rise in magic essence behind her. With a quick glance, she confirmed the essence was rising from Renji’s body. Then, she recalled the powerful attack he released upon the skies above Rodania.

Does he intend on using that attack?!

At this distance, Celia was easily within his attack range—she’d end up frozen at this rate.

“A-Argh!” She hurriedly prepared her own magic essence. She needed a magic that could withstand that blow...

“*Aperio: Caelestis Magicus. Verifico: Celia Claire*.” Celia immediately began reciting a spell. She was still unable to silently cast spells of high complexity, so she had to recite the whole thing.

“*Salvatio Initium. Impetus...Mora.*”

She steadily made her preparations to activate her magic. But at the same time...

“All right, Reiss! I’m ready!” Renji had also readied his attack; they were about to fire their strongest moves at each other. A test of strength in its simplest form was about to take place.

“Endless Force—”

“*Infinitus*!”

Move name and spell incantation overlapped with each other. During this moment, Celia turned her body midair to face Renji.

“—Blizzard!”

“*Durandal*!”

An enormous shock wave created an explosion of light that filled their vision.

Epilogue: A Prophetic Dream, or...

Ayase Miharu was dreaming.

In her sleepy haze, she was aware she was dreaming. It felt nostalgic for some reason. Like something she was missing dearly.

This...

This feeling was...

Who was it?

In her dream, Miharu tilted her head curiously. She couldn't see anything—there was nothing but white in front of her, but she was pretty sure she was tilting her head.

"It's not a dream," someone said to her.

"Huh?"

"This isn't a dream."

"As planned, that boy is near you and affecting your consciousness. But there's no time left, so listen carefully."

"Who...are you?" Miharu called out to the voice in the white space.

"You will have to make a decision at some point," the voice continued without answering her.

"Huh?"

"An extremely vital decision."

"..."

"When that time comes, one of those options will clearly be wrong. And you will feel absolutely certain of that."

"What are you saying...?"

"I highly recommend you choose the wrong choice."

The voice spoke into Miharu's ear like a witch's whisper. But that voice grew more and more distant, until—

"Hey..." a male voice said instead. The owner of this voice was—

"We meet again, Miharu."

"Huh?!"

Miharu shot up in bed. She looked around the pitch-black room in fear, but there was only Aki asleep in the next bed beside her.

“…”

Miharu sighed in relief and went back to sleep.

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Afterword

Hello everyone, it's Yuri Kitayama. Thank you for reading volume 22 of *Spirit Chronicles: Seirei Gensouki, The Immaculate Equation*.

How did you all find volume 22? Volume 20 holds the record for the number of pages in a volume, but volume 22 is greater in character count. It was quite the jam-packed volume, so it was terribly difficult to write. If the result of those efforts is having the readers think, "I want to read more quickly!" then as an author, I couldn't be happier.

Furthermore, the special edition of volume 22 comes with a drama CD, the script of which was written by me as well. The wonderful anime cast gathered together to record a noisy and fun story, so I hope you can enjoy it along with volume 22.

That's all for now. Let's meet again in volume 23!

Yuri Kitayama
July 2022

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Bonus Short Stories

The Dragon King's Bed

In the Galarc Kingdom, the morning after Sora appeared before Rio as the disciple of the Dragon King...

Overjoyed at her long-awaited reunion with the Dragon King's reincarnation, Sora had sobbed on and on endlessly. In order to comfort her, Rio had brought her to a room where they could sleep separately.

Thus came the morning. Aishia, Rio, and Sora had slept separately in a bedroom with three beds, but Rio had gotten up early to make breakfast. The quiet sound of Aishia's breathing could be heard in the room.

"Mmph...Dragon King..."

Sora's blissful sleep-talking could also be heard. Yet she was the first to wake up.

"*Yawn*... Wha—?!" She slowly blinked her eyes open and yawned cutely. But when she recalled how she'd met Rio yesterday, she sat up in bed with a gasp.

"Dragon King...?"

What if what happened yesterday was all a dream? Sora worriedly looked around the room, sighing in relief when she spotted Aishia still sleeping. It seemed she hadn't been dreaming after all.

"Heh... He he heh..."

Memories of last night rushed into her head. The joy of seeing the Dragon King after a thousand years overpowered every other thought in her head, making her smile happily. However, the Dragon King himself was nowhere to be seen. She was sure he had gone to sleep in the bed beside her yesterday...

"Where is he...?"

Sora's gaze locked onto the bed where Rio had slept. The blanket had been straightened roughly, but it was evident that Rio had slept there last night.

Th-This is where the Dragon King slept...

Being permitted to sleep beside such a sublime figure meant a lot to Sora. Merely looking back on the moment had her heart racing.

"...!"

Sora jumped headfirst into Rio's bed.

“Ha! Aha ha!”

Sora’s outrageous, disgraceful, and unthinkable actions filled her with both guilt and joy.

“Sora? Good morning...” Aishia woke up and rubbed her eyes sleepily.

“Eeeeeek!” Sora leaped up in horror. She quickly moved back to her own bed.

“What’s wrong?” Aishia tilted her head curiously, having missed what Sora had been doing.

“N-N-Nothing at all! Don’t scare Sora by waking up all of a sudden. Jeez!” Sora squeaked.

Arabian ☆ Queen

Amakawa Haruto was a second-year Japanese high school student, and Christina and Flora were sisters on exchange at Haruto’s high school, coming from the same overseas nation as Professor Celia. Christina was in the same year as Haruto, while Flora was one year younger.

One afternoon, during summer vacation, the sisters were relaxing in their home.

“The next play we’re going to do is called *Aladdin and the Magic Lamp*,” Flora said to her sister. “A formal request will be made to the student council at a later date, but I was hoping you could appear in the play as well.”

Flora was in the drama club, while Christina was in the student council along with Satsuki, Miharu, and Haruto. The drama club only consisted of a handful of girls, so the student council’s members usually helped out during events by filling roles.

“Well, I guess I wouldn’t mind...” It was a little embarrassing to act in front of others, but this was a request from her beloved little sister. Christina wanted to grant every wish of Flora’s that she could, so she readily agreed.

“I would love for you to take the role of the king’s daughter! I think it’d be perfect for you!” Flora recommended the princess role to Christina with a beaming smile.

“You could play the princess too...”

“No, no, I could never! And the truth is, I’ve already prepared a costume for you! I used an outfit from a dance called a belly dance as reference to make an Arabian costume in your size!” Flora picked up a paper bag she had left on the floor beside the sofa.

“You sure are well prepared...”

“I just know you’ll look great in it! Please try it on!”

“R-Right now?”

“Yes! I measured it myself, so I’m sure it’ll be fine, but let me know if the size needs to be fixed anywhere.”

“Fine... Wait just a moment.” Christina was utterly weak to her little sister’s requests. She accepted the paper bag and returned to her room to change into the costume.

“This... This is basically underwear. And the fabric is see-through.” Christina had finished changing into the costume Flora had prepared. She had her doubts about the amount of skin exposure as she was changing, but she was considerate enough of her little sister to finish changing into it. However, she had no intention of heading downstairs to the living room where Flora was waiting.

I should tell her to reconsider the costume, Christina decided with a sigh, moving to change back into her own clothes.

“I’m coming in, Christina.”

Just then, Flora barged into Christina’s room, too impatient to wait any longer.

“H-Hey, Flora... Jeez.” Christina sighed in resignation.

“What do you think?” Flora asked, seeking her opinion with an expectant look.

“It’s too revealing. I can’t stand in front of all those men wearing this. Please change the design to something less exposing,” Christina requested bluntly.

“Aww... I thought you’d look beautiful in it...” Flora gazed at Christina in the Arabian dress with a look of disappointment.

“Y-You won’t change my mind just because you’re making a face like that!”

“But you’re so beautiful like this. It’d be a shame to remake it without showing anyone... Oh, I know! You’d be okay with showing Haruto, right?”

“No, I wouldn’t! Why would I do that with a disgraceful outfit like this?!”

“I already texted everyone in the student council to come over while you were changing.”

“I-I’m going to change out of it now!”

She couldn’t let Haruto see her in this revealing outfit. Christina quickly began to change out of the costume, but how Satsuki’s arrival would later result in her changing back into the Arabian dress is a tale for another day.

The Dragon King's Cooking

Sora was a young girl and a disciple of the Dragon King. Her physical growth had stopped the moment she became a disciple, so she still looked like she was seven or eight years old after a thousand years. Becoming a disciple had also halted her mental growth, making her behavior that of a young girl as well.

Sora loved her master, the Dragon King. Rather than a romantic love, she worshipped him like a god. Because of that, the moment she met his reincarnation Rio, she directed her adoration towards him instead.

"Dragon King!" she called him happily.

"Yes, Sora?"

"Today's breakfast is really, really tasty!" Sora beamed.

"Thank you. I'm glad you're enjoying it."

"That's because it's great!" Sora resumed eating her breakfast. She stuffed her cheeks like a squirrel or hamster, making an expression of pure bliss.

Ever since becoming a disciple, her body was no longer capable of falling sick or changing shape. That's why she had a big appetite in spite of her childlike appearance, and she was capable of eating all the oily food she wanted, at any time of day. The same applied to Aishia as a spirit, and she also ate a lot. Ever since the three of them started living together, Rio had to prepare extra food in the mornings.

"Sora is so happy to be with the Dragon King again, eating his handmade cooking," Sora said joyfully. Her delight was so over the top, Rio felt embarrassed.

"Ha ha." He smiled while he watched Sora eat.

"*Nom nom*. Whoa... This meat! It's so good!" Sora's expression changed vividly with every bite, but she was at her happiest when she was eating meat.

It's worth cooking for someone when they enjoy it this much. What should I make next? What flavors does Sora like the best? Rio went through his repertoire of meat dishes in his head.

"Like Sora said, Haruto's cooking is delicious. Eating it warms the heart," Aishia suddenly added. With her untalkative personality, she had been eating in silence until now.

"Aishia's right! Everything the Dragon King makes has nutritional value and a recovery effect!" Sora huffed proudly.

"I don't think they have any such effects..." Rio smiled wryly at the exaggeration.

“They do! Sora’s heart is all warm now!” Sora declared firmly.

“Yup,” Aishia nodded.

“I see... I’ll have to live up to those expectations when I make lunch, then,” Rio replied shyly, carefully considering what to make for their next meal.

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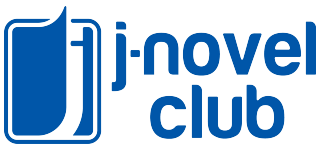

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